

“THANK GOD FOR BOBBY”  
ROBERT KENNEDY AND THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS

BY

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## APPROVAL

The undersigned certify that this thesis meets master's-level standards of research, argumentation, and expression.

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## DISCLAIMER

The conclusions and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author. They do not reflect the official position of the US Government, Department of Defense, the United States Air Force, or Air University.



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## ABSTRACT

Most accounts of the Cuban Missile Crisis portray the events as a standoff between United States President John Kennedy and Soviet Union Secretary Nikita Khrushchev. However, behind the scenes other members of Kennedy's staff, most importantly his brother Robert, facilitated backchannel negotiations with the Soviet Union through Ambassador Dobrynin and provided input and recommendations through the Executive Committee (EXCOMM) staff to the President. Robert Kennedy, as the U.S. Attorney General, filled a role far outside this position's typical responsibilities. The uniqueness of being the trusted brother to the President combined with his strengths at communicating with a diverse group of people allowed a freedom of thought amongst the President's advisors (EXCOMM) and communication between the White House and Kremlin. Furthermore, Robert Kennedy's ability to effectively communicate the stance of the United States and negotiate a settlement with the Kremlin through Dobrynin proved essential to avoiding nuclear conflict. This thesis employs a historical narrative format utilizing archive documents, interviews with key figures, and scholarly analysis. A combination of first person accounts compared with documents and notes from the key players, audio recordings of the actual meetings, combine to provide a breadth of analysis on the events as they occurred. Many documents and audio recordings have been released in recent years including those from the EXCOMM meetings, President Kennedy's phone conversations, and Robert Kennedy's personal confidential files. These resources provide new information from primary sources previously unavailable to the public. This thesis will attempt to separate common misperceptions about the crisis and answer the question of the level of RFK's importance to the resolution of the crisis.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

*If anybody is around to write after this, they are going to understand that we made every effort to find peace and every effort to give our adversary room to move. I am not going to push the Russians an inch beyond what is necessary.*

President John Kennedy

The Cuban Missile Crisis remains the closest the world has ever come to great power nuclear war. The decision-making process during the crisis remains instructive, as the participants managed to stand on the precipice of Armageddon without falling over. Key individuals contributed to decisions that ultimately offered an alternative, peaceful solution to total war. Robert Kennedy, as the President's brother, confidante, and Cabinet member was in a unique position to play an important role in this process. His personality and drive allowed him to spearhead numerous efforts to guide the eventual resolution of the crisis. Because of the trust that John Kennedy placed in him, Bobby Kennedy possessed the latitude and authority to act on behalf of the President. These actions included his role as an intermediary between the President and Chairman Khrushchev, drafting responses, and facilitating and guiding the discussions and debates among the Executive Committee (EXCOMM). Without Robert Kennedy in this role, the Cuban Missile Crisis would likely have ended much differently and perhaps led to war.



This thesis represents an attempt to explore and evaluate his contribution.

The 1950-60s marked a period of change in the history of the United States. This generation of politicians coming to power were shaped by their experiences in the preceding World War. They now dealt with an uncertain post-war world in which one of the principal allies in defeating the Nazis, the Soviet Union, had emerged as the United States' chief rival for international influence. Many Americans now viewed the emergence of the Soviet Union, and its Communist ideology, as a threat on par with that of the recently defeated Nazis. The blockade of Berlin, the Korean War, and advancements from both sides in the making of nuclear weapons increased the tensions of this Cold War. Castro's revolution in Cuba and displacement of the Batista regime was not initially seen as a threat to the United States. Once Castro began expropriating American property in Cuba without compensation and seeking an increased alliance with the Soviet Communist Party, the United States' view of Cuba considerably changed. In 1960, Castro openly acknowledged an alliance with the Soviet Union, and the United States now viewed Cuba "as a base for Communist subversion in the hemisphere,"<sup>1</sup> and a significant threat to United States interests.

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<sup>1</sup> Ernest R. May & Philip D. Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997), 20.

These developments in Cuba plagued the Eisenhower administration, which viewed the Castro regime not only as a strategic threat but also a political liability. When China fell to the Communists in 1949, the Republican party gained power, partly due to accusations that the Democratic leaders were responsible for the loss of China. The Republican Eisenhower administration now faced the same questions from Democrats on Cuba. During the campaign for president, Senator Kennedy, in a speech in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, charged that, “Mr. Nixon hasn't mentioned Cuba very prominently in this campaign. He talks about standing firm in Berlin, standing firm in the Far East, standing up to Khrushchev, but he never mentions standing firm in Cuba—and if you can't stand up to Castro, how can you be expected to stand up to Khrushchev?”<sup>2</sup> While these attacks against his opponent likely helped in his bid for the White House, they also forced Kennedy, once elected, to take a harder stance on Cuba. This inflexible position would contribute to the failures experienced at the Bay of Pigs early in the Kennedy Presidency. Nonetheless, the experience of the Kennedy administration during the Bay of Pigs invasion helped to shape the group of advisors, notably Bobby, and fostered relationships and ideas among the team that would confront the missile crisis in 1962. The

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<sup>2</sup> John F. Kennedy, President of the United States (Excerpts of Remarks by Senator John F. Kennedy, Johnstown, PA, October 15, 1960). The American Presidency Project.  
<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=74041>.

understanding of the events preceding, during, and after the Cuban Missile Crisis has been immensely aided by the vast number of sources now available to researchers.

The variety of primary sources currently available relating to the crisis provide an unparalleled amount of information about the famous thirteen days and beyond. The Cuban Missile Crisis was documented to an unprecedented level. And most importantly, the preponderance of this documentation was preserved and made available to the public. President Kennedy's decision to record many key meetings, his desire to establish a Presidential Library to provide access to his papers, the willingness of many of the participants to conduct oral history interviews, and finally the various conferences held with these same participants contribute unique insights into the crisis.

Six presidents are known to have used some form of secret recording devices or systems in the White House. Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, and Dwight Eisenhower were limited in their use, while John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and Richard Nixon used different systems extensively at various points in their administration.<sup>3</sup>

Prior to and during his presidency, Kennedy used a device called a Dictaphone, primarily for dictating letters and personal notes. In

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<sup>3</sup> Timothy Naftali, ed., *The Presidential Recordings: John F. Kennedy, The Great Crises, Volume One* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), xiii.

addition to this device, in mid-1962, the President asked Secret Service Agent Robert Bouck to install recording devices in three locations, the Cabinet Room, the Oval Office, and a study in the Executive Mansion.<sup>4</sup> Bouck obtained state-of-the-art Tandberg reel-to-reel tape recorders on loan from the U.S. Army Signal Corps. Two of these recorders were placed in the West Wing basement room for storing private presidential files. The third was installed in the Executive Mansion basement. Each of the West Wing recorders was attached to two different microphones in each location. In the Cabinet Room the microphones were installed in place of wall fixtures hidden behind drapes. The system was activated by a switch placed at the President's seat at the large Cabinet table. In the Oval Office, the two microphones were hidden in the knee-hole of the President's desk and the other was under a coffee table across the room. This system was activated by a push button similar to the one in the Cabinet Room.<sup>5</sup> Information on the system installed in the Mansion is lacking, likely because Bouck says Kennedy rarely used that system.<sup>6</sup> According to Bouck, he, his assistant Agent Chester Miller, and the president's secretary Evelyn Lincoln were the only individuals aware of the recording system's existence. Bouck does acknowledge that "I don't know if Kenny [O'Donnell, special assistant to the President] knew. I

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<sup>4</sup> Naftali, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume One*, xvii.

<sup>5</sup> Robert I. Bouck Oral History Interview: 6/25/1976. John F. Kennedy Oral History Collection, JFKL, 1-5.

<sup>6</sup> Bouck, Oral History, 7.

never told him but he might have. I never discussed it with Kenny. However, Kenny knew most everything.”<sup>7</sup> After the tapes finished recording, it was up to Bouck to place each in an envelope to be given to the President’s secretary, Mrs. Lincoln for storage. Bouck said, “It was my understanding that from her appointment book she could pretty well tell what was on the tapes. She and the President had a close liaison to when he was taping.”<sup>8</sup>

Bouck later said that “all of the equipment was removed immediately after the [22 November 1963] assassination...It was pulled before Johnson came into office. The same day as the assassination I pulled it all out—the entire installation.”<sup>9</sup> The stored tapes and dictabelt recordings were packaged with Kennedy’s papers, first at the main National Archives and later at a federal records depository in Waltham, Massachusetts.<sup>10</sup> Robert Kennedy became the custodian for the recordings after his brother’s death, and it is assumed he listened to the tapes while preparing his memoir on the Cuban Missile Crisis, *Thirteen Days*.<sup>11</sup>

Following Robert Kennedy’s assassination in 1968, Senator Edward Kennedy took over custody. After Nixon’s taping system was

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<sup>7</sup> Bouck, Oral History, 12.

<sup>8</sup> Bouck, Oral History, 4.

<sup>9</sup> Bouck, Oral History, 4.

<sup>10</sup> Naftali, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume One*, xviii.

<sup>11</sup> Naftali, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume One*, xviii-xix.

brought to light during the Watergate scandal in 1973, the Kennedy family confirmed the existence of the tapes and committed to turning them over to the National Archives. Eventually a deed of gift was negotiated to deposit all the tapes, aside from those dealing with private family matters, to the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library in Boston, Massachusetts.<sup>12</sup> The library began a process in 1993 to transfer the recorded tapes to Digital Audio Tape (DAT). Beginning in 1996 some of the recordings became available for public release, with more subsequently released as they were declassified.<sup>13</sup> The Miller Center, located at the University of Virginia, began the Presidential Recordings Project as an initiative to transcribe the 260 hours of recordings starting in 1995. These transcripts have been published in various forms, culminating with a six-volume set titled *The Presidential Recordings: John F. Kennedy*, containing both the transcripts and important contextual information spanning Kennedy's presidency.<sup>14</sup>

The intent of President Kennedy's decision to install the taping system remains unknown. The most accepted reason is his desire for a record of his presidency to be later used in writing his memoirs. Although President Kennedy controlled what was and wasn't recorded, those who have worked with the tapes and worked with Kennedy "find no

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<sup>12</sup> Naftali, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume One*, xix.

<sup>13</sup> Naftali, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume One*, xxi.

<sup>14</sup> Naftali, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume One*, xxii.

evidence that he taped only self-flattering moments. He often made statements or discussed ideas that would have greatly damaged him had they become public.”<sup>15</sup> Regardless of the intent, these recordings provide a great resource for researchers and historians attempting to understand the crisis and those involved. These recordings provide one of the most insightful and unprecedented perspectives into the decision making involved in a significant time in United States history.

The John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum provides researchers access to a vast amount of historical materials related to President Kennedy and his administration. On September 20, 1961 President Kennedy wrote to the Archivist of the United States to request that he work with Kennedy’s White House staff and representatives of Harvard University regarding the establishment of a future Presidential library in Massachusetts. Furthermore, the President publicly announced his intent to give his papers and memorabilia to the National Archives for this future library. Soon after the President’s death, members of his family and close friends met to discuss a fitting memorial to the slain leader. The group agreed that the library should be made up of three parts: a Museum, an Archive, and an educational institute. The John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library, Inc. was chartered December 5<sup>th</sup>, 1963, to plan and construct the library. This non-profit corporation was led by

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<sup>15</sup> Naftali, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume One*, xxiii.

Robert Kennedy, Stephen Smith, Robert McNamara, Douglas Dillon, and Arthur Schlesinger. President Kennedy's estate trustees, Jacqueline Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Edward Kennedy formally deeded his papers and historical items on February 25, 1965. On October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1969, while the papers were housed in a temporary location, the first portions of Presidential papers were released for research use. An original site for the library chosen by President Kennedy at Harvard University was abandoned due to delays and construction opposition. The corporation selected the eventual Columbia Point waterfront location in 1975 and completed construction in October of 1979.<sup>16</sup> The library houses the original papers from the President and his staff and provides access to some of the most important primary-source materials from the Kennedy Administration. In addition to these documents, the Library initiated an Oral History Program with the goal to "collect, preserve, and make available interviews conducted with individuals who were associated with the legacy of John F. Kennedy."<sup>17</sup> In total the library has conducted over 1,600 interviews. Many of these interviews are available through the library's website but others, including the Robert Kennedy interviews, are

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<sup>16</sup> John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, "History," JFKL, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/About-Us/About-the-JFK-Library/History.aspx> (accessed 9 April 2017).

<sup>17</sup> John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, "Oral History Program," JFKL, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/Research/About-Our-Collections/Oral-history-program.aspx> (accessed 9 April 2017).



only available through interlibrary loan or through the written permission of the interviewee.

Because documents and tape recordings alone do not provide the complete context within which they were created, other sources are needed in order to obtain a complete understanding of events. This includes insights into the thought processes of the individuals involved and details of those conversations and meetings that occurred away from the recording systems. Oral history interviews provide a great deal of insight, but in some cases memories fade and details are lost. An alternative to the oral history approach are conferences in which a group is brought together. At such gatherings, “the memories of the participants can help supply the missing context of the documents, and the documents can supply many of the facts which human memories distort or forget. And in concert, several people’s memories may test and correct each individual’s memory, so that errors in recollection or egregious distortions can be reduced.”<sup>18</sup> A series of five conferences was held between 1987-1992 between many of the actors of the Cuban Missile Crisis. The synergistic effect provided by the conference structure helps to provide missing links and context to the recordings and documents.

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<sup>18</sup> James G. Blight and David A. Welch, *On the Brink: Americans and Soviets Reexamine the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1989), 5-6.

The first of this series of conferences took place at Hawk's Cay in the Florida Keys between March 5-8, 1987. The conference brought together a group of academics including Graham Allison and Thomas Schelling, considered experts on the crisis, and veterans of the Kennedy administration who lived the crisis from the inside, including Robert McNamara, McGeorge Bundy, Douglas Dillon, Arthur Schlesinger, and Theodore Sorensen.<sup>19</sup>

The second conference took place in Cambridge, Massachusetts between October 11-13, 1987. The conference strived to fill the gap in understanding of the Soviet motives and actions identified at Hawk's Cay. Due to the immense western literature and study on the crisis and the closely guarded Soviet history there exists a largely one-sided perception of the crisis. The intent of the Cambridge Conference was to assist in breaking down that imbalance. The participants this time included three Soviets: Fyodor Burlatsky, Khrushchev's advisor and speechwriter, Sergo Mikoyan, personal secretary to the Soviet First Deputy Premier Anastas Mikoyan, and Georgi Shakhnazarov, Senior Staff Member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Joining this group were many of the participants from the Hawk's Cay conference including, McGeorge Bundy, Robert McNamara, and Theodore Sorensen along with a number of American scholars.

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<sup>19</sup> David A. Welch, ed., *Proceedings of the Hawk's Cay Conference on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, January 1989, iii-iv.

The third, and arguably most inclusive conference was held January 17-19, 1989 in Moscow. The group represented key actors from the Soviet Union, Cuba, and the United States. The American contingent contained many veterans from the first two gatherings. The Soviet group assembled, for the first time, many of the most important figures from the crisis including: Anatoly Dobrynin, Soviet Ambassador to the United States, Andrei Gromyko, Foreign Minister of the Soviet Union, Sergei Khrushchev, son of Nikita Khrushchev and editor of his father's memoirs, and Georgy Bolshakov, who acted as a secret courier for messages between Chairman Khrushchev and President Kennedy.<sup>20</sup> The well represented group created a different tone than previous conferences by portraying the conflict as three unique crises depending on the perspective: the United States' Cuban Missile Crisis, the Soviet Union's Caribbean Crisis, and the Cuban October Crisis. These competing perspectives led to a distinct debate and discussion from which a number of revelations emerged.

The fourth and fifth conferences were held in Antigua and Havana respectively. There is little written about or documentation from the 1991 conference in Antigua. This is likely because, according to Arthur Schlesinger, the Cubans "had stuck so dogmatically to the Party line in

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<sup>20</sup> Bruce J. Allyn, James G. Blight, and David A. Welch, eds., *Back to the Brink: Proceedings of the Moscow Conference on the Cuban Missile Crisis, January 27-28, 1989* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1992), ix-xiii.

Antigua that some of us questioned the usefulness...Where the Americans and Soviets had divulged internal debates and declassified relevant documents, the Cubans had gone on about the iniquities of the CIA, long since exposed in the US, and revealed nothing about their own decisions and actions.”<sup>21</sup> This lack of transparency threatened the next planned conference in Cuba. Nonetheless, the fifth conference took place in Havana, Cuba January 9-12, 1992. The conference was attended by many of the key living United States, Soviet Union, and Cuba crisis veterans.<sup>22</sup> This time the American delegation found Castro to be “more candid and illuminating than some of us expected and that he has more than fulfilled the assurance that he would contribute to historical knowledge.”<sup>23</sup>

Each conference provided new and different insights into the conflict. The recollections, anecdotes, and debates that ensued aid researchers in filling the gaps that the written or taped record fails to provide. Georgy Shakhnazarov, in the foreword to the written record of the Moscow Conference, writes about the uniqueness of these conferences: “there have been very few examples in the past when representatives of hostile or conflicting nations sat down around one

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<sup>21</sup> Arthur Schlesinger Jr. “Four Days with Fidel: A Havana Diary,” *The New York Review of Books* 39, no. 6 (March 26, 1992), 22.

<sup>22</sup> James G. Blight, Bruce J. Allyn, David A. Welch, *Cuba on the Brink*, (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1993), 3.

<sup>23</sup> Schlesinger, “Four Days with Fidel,” 26.

table to investigate seriously and business-like fashion what had occurred, and to draw lessons for the future...and coming to a shared view about the necessity of developing a mechanism to prevent a repetition of such conflicts in the future.”<sup>24</sup>

The release, in recent years, of documents and recordings from President Kennedy’s administration during the Cuban Missile Crisis provide a wealth of knowledge. When these documents are viewed together with the oral history interviews, and the information from the three conferences, the insight gained is extraordinary. Few pivotal events before the Cuban Missile Crisis have such a rich and thorough library of material upon which to draw. This abundance of available information allows for an extraordinary level of understanding of a crisis which defined the international environment for decades after.

This thesis utilizes a number of primary sources to analyze Robert Kennedy’s role and impact on the Cuban Missile Crisis. This analysis provides a unique view of a tumultuous time in United States history by combining many recently released tapes, transcripts, and accounts to provide a focused view of the Attorney General’s influence on the crisis. Bobby was not a popular choice for Attorney General, but the President desired to have someone he knew he could trust explicitly close by in his administration. The failure of the Bay of Pigs operation temporarily hurt

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<sup>24</sup> Allyn, Blight, and Welch, *Back to the Brink*, xv-xvi.

the Kennedy administration but served to educate and prepare the key advisors the President would rely upon during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Robert Kennedy's post-Bay of Pigs expanded foreign policy role provided him a position from which to positively impact the EXCOMM and the advice given to the President. Concurrent with his EXCOMM responsibility, the Attorney General was secretly meeting with Soviet contacts facilitating direct communication between his brother and Chairman Khrushchev. The combination of purposes that Robert Kennedy provided to his brother places him as the key to resolving the crisis. The extensive sources now available provide great insight and perspective on this role and allow a full analysis of Bobby's historical role.

## **Chapter 2**

### **The Selection and Education of Robert Kennedy**

*Jack needs all the good men he can get around him  
down there. There's none better than Bobby.*

Joseph Kennedy

After the election of President Kennedy, two events shaped the conditions that permitted the successful resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis. The first was the nomination and later confirmation of Robert Kennedy as United States Attorney General. The second was the failure of the Bay of Pigs operation in Cuba. In nominating his brother, the President defied popular opinion and made a decision that would prove integral to his presidency. Although failure is never a desired outcome, the lessons learned from the Bay of Pigs ensured that necessary changes in personnel and procedures were accomplished and in place prior to the discovery of Soviet missiles in Cuba. Together, these two events gave Robert Kennedy a position from which to advise, counsel, and protect his brother throughout the Cuban Missile Crisis.

### **Attorney General**

After engineering his brother's victory in the 1960 Presidential election as campaign manager, Robert Kennedy was uncertain of his next career move. In his book on President Kennedy, Theodore Sorensen relates that the President "privately predicted that the nomination of his brother would prove to be his most controversial choice then and one of his

wisest choices later, and he was right on both counts.”<sup>1</sup> According to Bobby in an interview with John Martin, the day after the election the President-elect “wanted to know what I wanted to do: if I wanted to, asked me if I wanted to be attorney general. I said I didn’t want to be attorney general.”<sup>2</sup> In a 1965 interview with Arthur Schlesinger, when asked about his desire to become Attorney General, he said, “The one thing I wasn’t interested in was to be attorney general because I didn’t want to have to be chasing people. I’d been with that committee [McClellan Committee] for five years, and the Hoffa business and all of that, and I just thought it was unpleasant, and I didn’t want to go through the rest of my life doing those kind of things.”<sup>3</sup> In fact, according to Bobby, there were many options other than attorney general to be considered. These included: undersecretary of defense, assistant secretary for Latin America,<sup>4</sup> Massachusetts Governor, his brother’s Senate seat, college president, or head of a foundation.<sup>5</sup> After taking a post-election vacation in Acapulco, Bobby returned to Washington and

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<sup>1</sup> Theodore C. Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, 1965, 257.

<sup>2</sup> Robert F. Kennedy Oral History Interview: RFK #1, February 29 and March 1, 1964. John F. Kennedy Oral History Collection. John F. Kennedy Library and Museum, 15.

<sup>3</sup> Robert F. Kennedy Oral History Interview: RFK #8, February 27, 1965. John F. Kennedy Oral History Collection. John F. Kennedy Library and Museum, 626.

<sup>4</sup> RFK #8, JFKL, 626.

<sup>5</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr, *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1978), 229.



began an advice-seeking tour on the attorney general decision.<sup>6</sup> Kennedy said, "Bill Douglas [Supreme Court Justice William O.] was against me doing it. He said I should make a name on my own, not just work for my brother. J. Edgar Hoover thought I should do it."<sup>7</sup> The outgoing attorney general William Rogers advised the job was "nothing but headaches," and later left Bobby a large bottle of aspirin to emphasize this point.<sup>8</sup> The overwhelming concern for Bobby was a fear that being attorney general would show "nepotism."<sup>9</sup> This perception worried Bobby; according to his administrative assistant, John Seigenthaler, "he [Robert Kennedy] didn't want to create great problems for his brother, and suddenly he was, he felt, creating problems for his brother." Instead, if he held a position in the government he wanted one where "he'd be able to take the responsibility for that problem without transmitting it to his brother."<sup>10</sup> According to close friend Kenneth O'Donnell, "Bobby loved his brother so much that he didn't want to hurt him...And at the same time he knew that he was almost essential, that he had to be there. There is nothing

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<sup>6</sup> Larry Tye, *Bobby Kennedy: Making of a Liberal Icon* (New York, NY: Random House, 2016), 136.

<sup>7</sup> RFK #8, JFKL, 627.

<sup>8</sup> Tye, *Bobby Kennedy Liberal Icon*, 136.

<sup>9</sup> RFK #1, JFKL, 15.

<sup>10</sup> John Seigenthaler Oral History Interview: JFK #3, February 22, 1966. John F. Kennedy Oral History Collection. John F. Kennedy Library and Museum, 302-304.

that Bobby said that wasn't out to help the President and help the country."<sup>11</sup>

Friends and advisors of the Kennedys worried about the effectiveness of an administration without Bobby in it. According to the book *Johnny We Hardly Knew Ye*, written by O'Donnell and other Kennedy intimates David Powers and Joe McCarthy, they all worried about losing their "reliable intermediary in our dealings with his brother. When we wanted to let Jack know about a problem too sensitive for one of us to mention to him, Bobby could tell him...When Jack was in one of his inaccessible moods, Bobby could always reach him and make him listen to reason."<sup>12</sup> All those close to the President had witnessed the effect Bobby had on his brother and the strengths their relationship provided. This bond was vital to the President's success and those most intimate friends and colleagues, including John Kennedy himself, understood this.

After intense internal debate, Bobby decided against accepting the attorney general position and called his brother to inform him of the decision. The President-elect responded, "well, don't tell me no now. I want to have breakfast with you in the morning. Come to the house on N

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<sup>11</sup> Ovid Demaris, *The Director: An Oral History of J. Edgar Hoover* (New York, NY: Harper's Magazine Press, 1975), 182.

<sup>12</sup> Kenneth P. O'Donnell, David F. Powers, and Joe McCarthy, *Johnny, We Hardly Knew Ye* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1972), 241.

Street.”<sup>13</sup> The next morning Robert Kennedy and John Seigenthaler joined John Kennedy for bacon and eggs in the breakfast nook of the future President’s temporary home.<sup>14</sup> According to Seigenthaler, just as Bobby began to state his case for declining the position, his brother cut him off, saying to John, “Do you know the arguments for and against this thing?”<sup>15</sup> The President-elect then began to list the case for Bobby’s acceptance saying,

I know full well these are going to be difficult years in many areas...I’m going to need to rely on many people...in this Cabinet there really is no person with whom I have been intimately connected...I need to know when problems arise, I’m going to have somebody who’s going to tell me the unvarnished truth, no matter what he thinks, and Bobby will do that. And so I need him...We’re going to have to change the climate in this country. And if my administration does the things I want it to do, I’m going to have to be able to have someone as Attorney General to carry these things out on whom I can rely completely. I can do that with Bobby.<sup>16</sup>

He ended by saying to Bobby, “I need you in this government,” John Kennedy then rose from his chair and walked to the kitchen. In his absence, Bobby remarked to Seigenthaler that he still had “some points I want to make.” Smiling, the President-elect returned and said, “So that’s it, general. Let’s go.”<sup>17</sup> According to Bobby, he accepted the job “not so

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<sup>13</sup> Seigenthaler, JFK #3, 307-308.

<sup>14</sup> Seigenthaler, JFK #3, 310.

<sup>15</sup> Seigenthaler, JFK #3, 321.

<sup>16</sup> Seigenthaler, JFK #3, 321-322.

<sup>17</sup> Seigenthaler, JFK #3, 325-326.

much as being attorney general, but just being around during that time.” Robert Kennedy returned to the Georgetown house of his brother around noon and was told by the President-elect “to brush my hair, and I brushed my hair and we went outside and announced it.”<sup>18</sup>

The announcement of his brother as attorney general was met with a fair amount of criticism from politicians and the press. In an editorial published in the December 17<sup>th</sup>, 1960 edition of the *New York Times*, the editor stated, “The one appointment thus far that we find most disappointing is Mr. Kennedy’s choice of his young brother Robert as Attorney General.” The article goes on to laud his ability as campaign manager but questioned his legal experience. “If Robert Kennedy were one of the outstanding lawyers of the country, a pre-eminent legal philosopher, a noted prosecutor, or legal officer at Federal or state level, the situation would be different. But his experience as counsel to the McClellan committee, notably successful as he was, is surely insufficient to warrant his present appointment.”<sup>19</sup> Similar sentiments followed in other major publications including the *Wall Street Journal* who said the appointment could become an “unqualified disaster.”<sup>20</sup> In the January 9<sup>th</sup>, 1961 edition of *The New Republic*, Alexander Bickel penned an article titled “Robert F. Kennedy: The Case Against Him for Attorney General.”

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<sup>18</sup> RFK #1, JFKL, 18.

<sup>19</sup> Editorial, *New York Times*, 17 Dec 1960, 22.

<sup>20</sup> Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, 233.

In the article Bickel asserts that “in his brief but highly visible professional career, Mr. Kennedy has demonstrated specific grounds for disqualification.” And finally, at the conclusion of his attack on Kennedy, he ended with, “On the record, Robert F. Kennedy is not fit for the office.”<sup>21</sup> In the end, however, the President-elect viewed the situation in much the same way as the patriarch of the family, Joseph Kennedy, who told his son in his usual direct manner, “Fuck public opinion, he’ll do a good job.”<sup>22</sup>

The support needed for Robert Kennedy’s confirmation by the Senate came from one of the most unlikely sources, the Vice President-elect, Lyndon Johnson. Certainly, the motives for Johnson’s action proved to be entirely self-serving. According to Bobby Baker, the Senate’s Secretary to the Majority Leader, in an interview he conducted for the Senate Historical Office, conservative Senator Richard Russell from Georgia had enough votes to kill the nomination. Baker says he received a call from Johnson saying, “Bobby [Baker], this will be the most humiliating defeat I, as Vice President, could suffer if I don’t have enough influence in the Senate to confirm the President’s nominee, even though it’s his brother.” In response, Baker says he,

took Senator Russell over to the Secretary of the Senate’s office and I really poured heavy drinks in him. I said, ‘Your best friend [Johnson] and my best friend

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<sup>21</sup> Alexander M. Bickel, “Robert F. Kennedy: The Case Against Him for Attorney General,” *The New Republic*, January 9, 1961, 15, 19.

<sup>22</sup> Tye, *Bobby Kennedy Liberal Icon*, 133.

is pleading with me to talk to you to see if you'll let us have a voice vote.' Between my persuasion and the booze, he agreed. That's the only way he was confirmed. He would have been defeated if there had been a roll-call vote. The Republicans and Southern Democrats had enough votes to defeat Bobby Kennedy to be Attorney General.<sup>23</sup>

After the hearings concluded a week later, only a single senator, Gordon Allott, spoke in opposition, and the Senate confirmed Bobby. Robert Kennedy was sworn in as the Attorney General of the United States on January 20<sup>th</sup>, 1961, becoming the third youngest individual to hold that office.<sup>24</sup>

The attacks Robert Kennedy experienced in the press and from the legislature were not unexpected, and it is likely the many doubters motivated the Attorney General even more to succeed. Bobby understood that his cabinet position provided him the opportunity to protect and assist his brother. He would become the President's most trusted advisor and confidant, especially during the administration's most contentious moments. Eventually, according to author Larry Tye, his performance "would exceed even the forecasts of his brother."<sup>25</sup>

### **The Bay of Pigs**

When President Kennedy took office, he inherited the Eisenhower administration's plans for the overthrow of Communist dictator Fidel

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<sup>23</sup> Robert G. Baker Oral History Interview, June 1, 2009-May 4, 2010. Senate Historical Office, 83.

<sup>24</sup> Tye, *Bobby Kennedy Liberal Icon*, xx.

<sup>25</sup> Tye, *Bobby Kennedy Liberal Icon*, 140.

Castro in Cuba. Early in 1960 the Eisenhower administration approved a CIA plan for the training and arming of a Cuban exile army of liberation. During the last weeks of the Eisenhower presidency, apparently unknown to Eisenhower, the CIA decided to increase the size of this guerilla force to a 1,500 man conventional army in Guatemala.<sup>26</sup> President Kennedy acknowledged the threat posed by the Castro regime so close to the United States. After he learned of the CIA-planned invasion scheme the President, with what seemed to be a complete consensus among those advising him, gave approval for the operation. On April 17<sup>th</sup>, 1961, a group of CIA-trained Cuban exiles landed at the Bay of Pigs.<sup>27</sup> Multiple issues occurred from the start and within two days the brigade was defeated. This failure gave additional strength to the Castro regime and embarrassed the United States.

The Bay of Pigs fiasco was a low point for the Kennedy administration and in particular the President. Although President Kennedy personally authorized the mission, very few in his administration were aware of the operation. When word spread among the press, Ambassador Stevenson, and Kennedy's press secretary Pierre Salinger, who were uninformed, became blindsided by questions from the

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<sup>26</sup> Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 295.

<sup>27</sup> Andrei Kokoshin, "Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis in the Context of Strategic Stability," *Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs: Discussion Paper* (September 2012): 8.

United Nations and the press.<sup>28</sup> The level of deception in the operation undermined the public's trust in the government at every level.<sup>29</sup>

According to Robert Kennedy's press secretary Edwin Guthman, "the combination of secrecy within the government and an elaborate but clumsy, unrealistic attempt to camouflage American involvement with the expedition irreparably damaged the government's credibility."<sup>30</sup> The President was devastated by the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion and vowed to ensure a similar mistake was never again made. President Kennedy summed up his feelings afterwards saying to himself, "All my life I've known better than to depend on the experts. How could I have been so stupid, to let them go ahead?"<sup>31</sup> Bobby explained, "The President doesn't want to blame anyone for what's happened. He takes all of that. He wants to have the process by which the Cuban decision was reached studied carefully and examined to find out why it happened and what steps can be taken to prevent it from happening again."<sup>32</sup>

Although Robert Kennedy had little involvement in the planning and decision-making of the operation he nonetheless played a part. Irving Janis, in his book *Groupthink*, says that during Bobby's participation in the last few days of planning he served as a mindguard

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<sup>28</sup> Edwin Guthman, *We Band of Brothers* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1971), 109-110.

<sup>29</sup> Guthman, *We Band of Brothers*, 111.

<sup>30</sup> Guthman, *We Band of Brothers*, 111-112.

<sup>31</sup> Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 309.

<sup>32</sup> Guthman, *We Band of Brothers*, 113.



for the President. Robert Kennedy attempted to protect his brother in every situation and this role had the same intent, unfortunately the effect in this case was a negative one. According to Janis, a mindguard “protects [others] from thoughts that might damage their confidence in the soundness of the policies to which they are committed or to which they are about to commit themselves.”<sup>33</sup> Acting as a mindguard for his brother, Robert Kennedy took Sorensen aside at a party to celebrate his wife Ethel’s birthday, and said, “I hear you don’t think much of this business.” After asking why and listening to Schlesinger’s response, Bobby responded, “You may be right or you may be wrong, but the President has made his mind up. Don’t push it any further. Now is the time for everyone to help him all they can.”<sup>34</sup> With good intentions Bobby actually became an accomplice to the groupthink that created, according to Schlesinger, “a curious atmosphere of assumed consensus.”<sup>35</sup> Groupthink, according to Janis, occurs when members of a “small cohesive group tend to maintain esprit de corps by unconsciously developing a number of shared illusions and related norms that interfere with critical thinking and reality testing.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Irving L. Janis, *Groupthink* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1983), 41.

<sup>34</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), 259.

<sup>35</sup> Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 250.

<sup>36</sup> Janis, *Groupthink*, 35.

To determine why things went so wrong, the President created a committee headed by General Maxwell Taylor to look into the matter. The study group members included Taylor, Bobby, Admiral Arleigh Burke, and Allen Dulles.<sup>37</sup> Robert Kennedy “was the man assigned to scrutinize and regroup his brother’s counselors so that a Bay of Pigs could never happen again.”<sup>38</sup> On June 13<sup>th</sup>, 1961 the Cuban Study Group forwarded the final report to the President in a series of four memorandums titled “Narrative of the Anti-Castro Cuban Operation Zapata,” “Immediate Causes of Failure of the Operation Zapata,” “Conclusions of the Cuban Study Group,” and “Recommendations of the Cuban Study Group to President Kennedy.”<sup>39</sup> Among the group’s findings were that “operational restrictions designed to protect its covert character should have been accepted only if they did not impair the chance of success.” And in a conclusion that would play out again in

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<sup>37</sup> “First Meeting of General Maxwell Taylor’s Board of Inquiry on Cuban Operations Conducted by the CIA, memorandum for the record, 22 April 1961,” *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume X, Cuba, January 1961-September 1962*, eds. Louis J. Smith and David S. Patterson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1997), Document 169.

<sup>38</sup> Michael R. Beschloss, *The Crisis Years: Kennedy and Khrushchev 1960-1963* (New York, NY: Edward Burlingame Books, 1991), 304.

<sup>39</sup> “Letter From the Chairman of the Cuba Study Group (Taylor) to President Kennedy, 13 June 1961,” *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume X, Cuba, January 1961-September 1962*, eds. Louis J. Smith and David S. Patterson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1997), Document 230.

Vietnam, the group noted, “The operation suffered from being run from the distance of Washington.”<sup>40</sup>

Bobby related his opinion on the reason the operation failed as: “lack of coordination between the various departments, the failure of heads of agencies and departments to work together, the failure to discuss some of these problems together and consider all sides of them.”<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, Bobby, in *Thirteen Days*, points to the “virtual unanimity at the time...if any official in the highest ranks of government were opposed, they did not speak out. Thereafter, I suggested there be a devil’s advocate to give an opposite opinion if none were pressed.”<sup>42</sup> In *Groupthink*, Irving Janis recommends that, “At every meeting devoted to evaluating policy alternatives, at least one member should be assigned the role of devil’s advocate” in order to avoid a premature consensus.<sup>43</sup> Not only would Robert Kennedy make this suggestion, but he would expertly play this role in many of the Missile Crisis meetings. In the group’s final memorandum, they acknowledged that “We have been struck with the general feeling that there can be no long-term living with

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<sup>40</sup> “Memorandum No. 3 From the Cuba Study Group to President Kennedy, 13 June 1961,” *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume X, Cuba, January 1961-September 1962*, eds. Louis J. Smith and David S. Patterson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1997), Document 233.

<sup>41</sup> RFK #8, JFKL, 602.

<sup>42</sup> Robert F. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 86.

<sup>43</sup> Janis, *Groupthink*, 267-268.

Castro as a neighbor...There are only two ways to view this threat; either to hope that time and internal discontent will eventually end it, or to take active measures to force its removal."<sup>44</sup> These questions would remain throughout the Kennedy Presidency and beyond.

In Theodore Sorensen's book *Kennedy*, published in 1965, he sums up the issues with decisions made regarding the Bay of Pigs:

With hindsight it is clear that what in fact he had approved was diplomatically unwise and militarily doomed from the outset. What he thought he was approving appeared at the time to have diplomatic acceptability and little chance of outright failure. That so great a gap between concept and actuality should exist at so high a level on so dangerous a matter reflected a shocking number of errors in the whole decision-making process—errors which permitted bureaucratic momentum to govern instead of policy leadership.<sup>45</sup>

The committee's findings triggered many changes in personnel and the way in which the administration made decisions. According to Robert Kennedy, "the Bay of Pigs and our investigation led to a reorganization. It was run sort of like President Kennedy ran his staff at the Senate...our investigation stimulated some more clear-cut lines of authority."<sup>46</sup> Losing faith in his Joint Chiefs, Taylor became the personal

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<sup>44</sup> "Memorandum No. 4 From the Cuba Study Group to President Kennedy, 13 June 1961," *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume X, Cuba, January 1961-September 1962*, eds. Louis J. Smith and David S. Patterson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1997), Document 234.

<sup>45</sup> Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 302.

<sup>46</sup> RFK #8, JFKL, 608.

military advisor to the President, Dulles retired and was replaced by John McCone, and most importantly, the President ensured his most trusted advisors, including Bobby, were brought together to advise on tough decisions. The members of this group, many of whom would serve together during the Cuban Missile Crisis, "developed such rapport and mutual respect in working together that they were able to function with increasing effectiveness."<sup>47</sup> Robert Kennedy felt "the Bay of Pigs was the best thing that happened to the administration"<sup>48</sup> because the lessons learned from the failure of this endeavor provided for the later success of the EXCOMM. The most valuable result of the Bay of Pigs was the increased role of Robert Kennedy in all important decisions. Bobby addressed this with John Martin, "I was not involved in international affairs, really, up until after the Bay of Pigs."<sup>49</sup> Although the Bay of Pigs and other attempts to overthrow Castro failed, the lessons learned helped to shape the Kennedy administration and prepare them to succeed in handling the Cuban Missile Crisis the following year. "The President now realized that Robert was his only adviser who operated almost purely from the presidential point of view and with only the President's welfare at heart."<sup>50</sup> Without the Bay of Pigs lessons, the crisis would have likely turned out dramatically different.

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<sup>47</sup> Guthman, *We Band of Brothers*, 114.

<sup>48</sup> RFK #8, JFKL, 609.

<sup>49</sup> RFK #1, JFKL, 30.

<sup>50</sup> Beschloss, *The Crisis Years*, 304-305.



Figure 1. President Kennedy meeting with his Attorney General outside the White House in October 1962.  
*Cecil Stoughton. White House Photographs. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston.*

Robert Kennedy's place in his brother's cabinet and his increased role in international crises following the Bay of Pigs were essential to the handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis. While Bobby attempted to protect his brother from dissenting opinions late in the Bay of Pigs planning, he later realized these attempts had a negative effect and changed his role accordingly in the Cuban Missile Crisis. These precursors set the necessary conditions for the peaceful resolution of the 1962 crisis. The personalities involved in advising the President were in place, and had formed relationships with each other because of the lessons learned from the Bay of Pigs disaster. Among those individuals, the key personality of Robert Kennedy would prove the most valuable.

## Chapter 3

### Robert Kennedy and EXCOMM

*Bobby Kennedy's good sense and his moral character were perhaps decisive.*

Douglas Dillon

Following the failure of the Bay of Pigs, the Kennedy Administration increased efforts to determine future solutions to the Castro problem in Cuba. Efforts of the intelligence community to gather information expanded and these efforts are likely the only reason the Soviet's transport of missiles to Cuba were discovered.

In 1962, the United States received intelligence on activities in Cuba through four primary sources: shipping intelligence, refugees from Cuba, agents inside Cuba, and U-2 reconnaissance flights.<sup>1</sup> The development of the U-2 Dragon Lady took place under Kennedy's predecessor, President Dwight Eisenhower. The aircraft represented the culmination of a twenty-month process by Lockheed's classified production arm Skunk Works, to build and deploy aircraft capable of photographing areas of interest from 70,000 feet and distinguishing objects only a few feet in length.<sup>2</sup> This technology provided a dramatic leap forward in reconnaissance and the ability to obtain concrete evidence of adversary actions.

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<sup>1</sup> Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision* (New York, NY: Longman, 1999), 219.

<sup>2</sup> Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 221-222.



## October 16, 1962

On the morning of October 15<sup>th</sup>, the Naval Photographic Intelligence Center (NPIC) began processing the film from U-2 mission 3101. At 9:30 A.M. Arthur Lundahl, director of the NPIC, held a meeting with his division chiefs to discuss routine matters when the film arrived at the NPIC for photo-interpretation. As the analysis teams scanned the film they noticed what at first appeared to be preparatory work for the building of SA-2 missile sites, but were unable to locate the guidance radar and missile launchers associated with this type of weapon system. Upon further investigation, the team discovered six canvas-covered objects measuring over sixty feet long. The analysts were unable to identify the objects but based on the shape and activity captured, labeled the film as a “possible missile-associated installation.”<sup>3</sup> The position and size of the objects were different than what was expected at Soviet SA-2 sites, and “did not correspond to anything seen in Cuba before.”<sup>4</sup> In their analysis, the NPIC created and used a series of books referred to as black-books, which contained all the information on Soviet SAMs and MRBMs. When comparing their discovery to photos of a SS-4 missile, Vince DiRenzo, a CIA member of the team, commented, “That sure looks like it.”<sup>5</sup> After additional verification, including that of Lundahl, the NPIC

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<sup>3</sup> Dino A. Brugioni, *Eyeball to Eyeball*, ed. Robert F. McCort (New York, NY: Random House, 1991), 197.

<sup>4</sup> Brugioni, *Eyeball to Eyeball*, 199.

<sup>5</sup> Brugioni, *Eyeball to Eyeball*, 199.



Director placed a call to CIA deputy director for intelligence, Ray Cline. After identifying himself, Lundahl said, “Ray, our worst fears are coming to pass in Cuba, because it looks like something more than defensive missilery is being deployed. In fact, we are convinced and ready to publish at your command an indication of the insertion of what seems to be medium-range ballistic missiles in Cuba.”<sup>6</sup> Lundahl went on to provide more details to Cline, who afterward began notifying the Joint Chiefs and intelligence community.

That evening McGeorge Bundy, the special assistant to the President for national security affairs, and his wife were hosting an intimate dinner for friends Chip and Avis Bohlen before Chip left to become the U.S. ambassador to France.<sup>7</sup> At 8:30 P.M Bundy received a call from Cline informing him of the U-2 photographs showing evidence of nuclear weapons in Cuba. Cline said, “Those things we’ve been worrying about—it looks as though we’ve really got something.”<sup>8</sup> Bundy decided to wait until the next morning before informing the President. He rationalized this decision for two primary reasons; one was a desire to avoid a late-night meeting which might highlight to the press or Soviet agents that something out of the ordinary was occurring. The other was

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<sup>6</sup> Brugioni, *Eyeball to Eyeball*, 203.

<sup>7</sup> Timothy Naftali and Philip Zelikow, eds., *The Presidential Recordings: John F. Kennedy, The Great Crises, Volume Two* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 395.

<sup>8</sup> Naftali and Zelikow, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Two*, 395.

that Bundy thought that for President Kennedy “a quiet evening and a night of sleep were the best preparation [the President] could have in the light of what would face [him] in the next days.”<sup>9</sup> Bundy thus felt that “it seemed better to wait twelve hours and protect both his sleep and the secret.”<sup>10</sup>

### **October 16, 1962**

Upon learning on the morning of October 16<sup>th</sup> of the presence of missiles and transports in Cuba from McGeorge Bundy, President Kennedy angrily shouted, “he can’t do that to me!”<sup>11</sup> Immediately afterward the President called his brother and requested, in coded words, that Robert get in touch with Bundy to get up to speed on these new developments.<sup>12</sup> The President then ordered Bundy to assemble his foreign policy advisors from the State Department, the Pentagon, and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in the Cabinet Room at the next opening on his calendar, 11:45 A.M.<sup>13</sup> After setting up the meeting, the President met with Bobby for a private discussion before continuing his regularly scheduled events for the day. Following his final morning meeting, the President and his advisors gathered in the Cabinet Room.

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<sup>9</sup> McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival* (New York, NY: Random House, 1988), 684-685.

<sup>10</sup> Bundy, *Danger and Survival*, 396.

<sup>11</sup> Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 339.

<sup>12</sup> Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro, & Kennedy 1958-1964* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 222.

<sup>13</sup> Fursenko and Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble*, 223.

This historic meeting of the group later known as the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (EXCOMM) was attended by a diverse group of Presidential advisors including Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs McGeorge Bundy, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, Chairman of the United States Joint Chiefs of Staff General Maxwell Taylor, Secretary of the Treasury Douglas Dillon, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Nitze, Under Secretary of State George Ball, Ambassador-at-Large Llewellyn Thompson, Director of Central Intelligence John McCone, Special Assistant to the President Ted Sorensen, Adviser to the President Dean Acheson, Vice President Lyndon Johnson, Deputy Director of Central Intelligence Lieutenant General Marshall Carter, Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell Gilpatric, Central Intelligence Agency Division Chief Sidney Graybeal, Deputy Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs U. Alexis Johnson, Central Intelligence Agency Assistant Director of Photographic Interpretation Arthur Lundahl and Secretary of State Dean Rusk.<sup>14</sup>

In an interview given in 1964, Robert Kennedy describes the reason for the creation of the EXCOMM. “The National Security Council was too large, and sometimes you have thirty-five people there. Well, you'd never get any business done in the National Security Council...So

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<sup>14</sup> Dean Rusk, *As I Saw It* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990), 230.

the president wanted to get it down to people in whom he had confidence.”<sup>15</sup> Robert Kennedy, as a Cabinet Member of the Kennedy Administration, was the most valuable member of this group in terms of advising and assisting the President during the greatest crisis of his Presidency. Bobby’s unique relationship to the President and his ability to think through multiple levels of a problem proved vital to the successful resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Bobby described his role in the administration in a 1964 interview as “raising problems about courses of action that were suggested to the president at conferences...to raise some of the difficulties that might occur to me, as, perhaps, looking at it from an outside point of view.”<sup>16</sup>

The meeting began with a discussion of the details concerning the missiles, the IL-28 bombers, the possible intentions of the Soviets, the dangers of action in Berlin, the U.S. missiles in Turkey, and the political ramifications of the various response options available. Much of the discussion centered on determining the course of action but initially most of the advisors present appeared to assume that military operations were a foregone conclusion. The President voiced the available options saying, “we’re certainly going to number one. We’re going to take out those missiles. The question will be whether, what I would describe as

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<sup>15</sup> Robert F. Kennedy Oral History Interview: RFK #1, February 29 and March 1, 1964. John F. Kennedy Oral History Collection. John F. Kennedy Library and Museum, 95.

<sup>16</sup> RFK #1, JFKL, 19.

number two, which would be a general air strike. That we're not ready to say, but we should be in preparation for it. The third is the general invasion. At least we're going to do number one."<sup>17</sup> For the majority of the first half of the meeting, Robert Kennedy took an observational role, absorbing the information and formulating possible impacts to the United States from the discussed actions. Robert is the first person to acknowledge the likely reprisals from the Soviet Union if air strikes against Cuba took place, saying "You're going to kill an awful lot of people, and we're going to take an awful lot of heat on it...Well, I would think it's almost incumbent upon the Russians then, to say, Well, we're going to send them in again. And if you do it again, we're going to do the same thing to Turkey. And we're going to do the same thing to Iran."<sup>18</sup> The Attorney General continues later in considering the global impacts by voicing concerns about the impact that troop buildups might have in Berlin saying, "there's been so much attention on Berlin in the last...Would you have to move them so everybody would know it was Cuba?"<sup>19</sup> During this first meeting of the EXCOMM, Robert Kennedy was thinking through the Soviet responses and the impact on U.S. interests in other parts of the world outside Cuba forcing the group to open the aperture of their thinking away from a focus only on Cuba. At the

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<sup>17</sup> Naftali and Zelikow, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Two*, 422.

<sup>18</sup> Naftali and Zelikow, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Two*, 416.

<sup>19</sup> Naftali and Zelikow, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Two*, 418.

conclusion of the meeting the decision was made to resume later that evening at 6:30 P.M.

When the group reconvened that evening, the discussion focused initially on tactical details regarding missile range, identification, vulnerability, and launch timing windows. As the conversation shifted to a military response against the missile sites, General Maxwell Taylor admitted to the President that “you’re never sure of having, absolutely, getting everything down there.”<sup>20</sup> This acknowledgment that an airstrike may not destroy all the missiles created uncertainty in the minds of those present, especially the President, over the efficacy of the military course of action initially favored at that moment.

As the meeting continued, Robert Kennedy again interjected thoughts on the long-term, second, and third-order effects of the contemplated actions. He understood these missiles in the hands of Castro created a shift in the balance of power in South America that affected the future ability of the United States to intervene according to interests in that area. The Attorney General posed a hypothetical scenario in Venezuela where Castro threatened, “you move troops down into that part of Venezuela; we’re going to fire those missiles.”<sup>21</sup> To which the President responded, “It makes them look like they’re coequal

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<sup>20</sup> Naftali and Zelikow, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Two*, 429-436.

<sup>21</sup> Naftali and Zelikow, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Two*, 442.

with us.” These considerations were integral to the decision-making process, and Robert Kennedy expertly injected these variables into the calculations of the group advising the President.

Later in the conversation, Bobby referenced the future of Cuba after such a strike is carried out. “Where are we six months from now? Or that we’re in any better position? Or aren’t we in a worse position if we go in and knock them out?”<sup>22</sup> He and McNamara went back and forth describing to the other members the need for a blockade to prevent the reintroduction of missiles after strikes destroy those already in Cuba. This blockade might mean, “we’re going to have to sink Russian ships. Then we’re going to have to sink Russian submarines.” Finally, McNamara comments, “Because the consequences of these actions have not been thought through clearly. The one that the Attorney General just mentioned is illustrative of that.”<sup>23</sup>

At the end of the meeting the conversation turned to when and where the group would reconvene. Concerns over drawing attention to the proceedings and the President’s travel schedule caused the group to delay further large meetings until the 18<sup>th</sup>. Meanwhile, multiple small groups met throughout the night at the State Department and Pentagon. Secretary McNamara ended up sleeping at the Pentagon.

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<sup>22</sup> Naftali and Zelikow, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Two*, 450.

<sup>23</sup> Naftali and Zelikow, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Two*, 450.



Robert Kennedy's notes contain a tally of the initially preferred option of the EXCOMM members in two columns, blockade and strike. These sides would change and shift as the crisis continued over the coming days.

<u>Blockade</u>	<u>Strike</u>
1) McNamee	1) Mac Bundy
2) Gelpi +	2) Taylor
3) Rush +	3) Chiefs
4) Thompson	4) Acheson
5) Bohlen	5) Dillon
6) Adlai -	6) J. Lee Case (?) <u>Swartz</u>
7) Rutledge (?) →	
8) Lovett	
9) Ed Martin	
10) Ball	
11) Alexis Pharo	
12) Souren	

Figure 2. Robert Kennedy Handwritten Notes, October 16, 1962  
Source: Papers of Robert F. Kennedy. Attorney General Papers. Series 09.  
Attorney General's Confidential File, Box 215, Folder: "Cuba: Executive committee meetings: RFK notes and memos, 1962: October-December (2 of 2 folders)" JFKL

**October 17, 1962**



The next day the President continued his regular schedule, and there are no extant taped conversations regarding the crisis. CIA Director McCone returned to Washington after arranging the funeral for his step-son who perished in an automobile accident. McCone arrived for his first meeting on the crisis at 9:30 A.M. and expressed disagreement with the President's current preference for an airstrike. McCone, in his memorandum documenting the meeting, states the "President seemed inclined to act promptly if at all, without warning, targetting [sic] on MRBM's and possibly airfields. Stated Congressional Resolution gave him all authority he needed and this was confirmed by Bundy, and therefore seemed inclined to act."<sup>24</sup> Kennedy then asked McCone to visit his predecessor, Eisenhower, at his home in Gettysburg to keep him abreast of the situation. After meeting with the West German Foreign Minister Gerhard Schroeder, the President continued his regularly scheduled events, a National Day of Prayer at St. Matthews Cathedral, lunch at the Libyan embassy, and finally a political trip to Connecticut, returning to Washington later that night.<sup>25</sup>

While the President was absent, the Joint Chiefs worked throughout the day creating plans for air strikes against five target sets

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<sup>24</sup> "Brief Discussion with the President - 9:30 a.m. - 17 October 1962," *CIA Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962*, ed. Mary S. McAuliffe (Washington: History Staff, Central Intelligence Agency, 1992), Document 55.

<sup>25</sup> Naftali and Zelikow, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Two*, 498-499.

and included a list of the required number of sorties for each option. Meanwhile, many of the EXCOMM members met throughout the day to consider and discuss the merits of the considered options. When the group adjourned for dinner, Robert Kennedy and Theodore Sorensen departed to meet the President at the airport upon his return. They briefed him on the day's developments and highlighted the still unresolved questions. Following the update, likely deciding that his presence might impede an honest and open dialogue amongst the group, JFK decided not to attend the meetings that night. Instead, knowing that his closest advisor Bobby would be present, he was content to allow the group to continue without him that evening.<sup>26</sup> Robert Kennedy described the reason, in 1964 to Schlesinger, for his brother's absence during those first meetings as, "freer conversation, and secondly, he was campaigning, see, don't forget that. And I always felt that things didn't go well when he was there. We had a fight about it at the time."<sup>27</sup> Only Bobby could tell the President that his presence was detrimental and not only keep his job but gain his acceptance.

The EXCOMM group reconvened at 10:00 P.M. for a two-hour discussion. As the meeting ended, the group remained split among the primary options. Rusk, Taylor, and McCone preferred a strike against

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<sup>26</sup> Naftali and Zelikow, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Two*, 512-514.

<sup>27</sup> RFK #8, JFKL, 615.

the missile sites without warning. Bohlen endorsed a strike but only if preceded by an ultimatum to Khrushchev. Thompson, Martin, and Gilpatric agreed that a declaration of war followed by a complete blockade of the island was the best alternative. Robert Kennedy's notes summarized the options presented during the groups' discussion:

- 1) An ultimatum to Khrushchev followed by a strike
- 2) A limited strike without prior warning or negotiation, but with notifying key allies
- 3) A political warning followed by a naval blockade and readiness for other actions
- 4) A large-scale strike after some political preparation
- 5) Proceeding directly to an invasion<sup>28</sup>

### **October 18, 1962**

The 18<sup>th</sup> of October represented a turning point in the crisis. The consensus amongst the President's advisors shifted substantially from that morning to the end of the meeting towards the option that would ultimately be used. The primary reason for this change was Robert Kennedy.

Following a Cabinet meeting on the Federal budget, the President and EXCOMM met at 11:10 A.M. Earlier that morning, intelligence analysts detected new evidence of intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) with twice the range of the previously identified MRBMs. The

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<sup>28</sup> Naftali and Zelikow, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Two*, 514.

Cuban missiles could now reach almost the entire continental United States. This new evidence created a sense of urgency for the EXCOMM meeting. The proof of IRBMs caused some members to change their recommendation away from blockade towards massive strikes against targets in Cuba. McNamara, who Robert Kennedy previously had in the blockade column, now advocated that “we consider nothing short of a full invasion as applicable military action.”<sup>29</sup> Ultimately the new evidence and additional missile sites, when considered by the military planners, doubled the number of sorties required for the strike option, considerably enlarging the size of the operation. Again, Taylor emphasizes, “I would stress the point, Mr. President, that we’ll never be guaranteeing 100 percent.”<sup>30</sup> The tone of the conversation then takes a very perceptible shift as the President asks questions about political options and the repercussions these might have on the military operation. The most obvious impact that an ultimatum or other communications with Khrushchev would be the loss of surprise and increased danger to U.S. troops involved in conducting the air strikes.

Robert Kennedy sensed that the President was looking for an alternative to the air strikes, and asked the group, “could you maybe just run through it [the blockade]? Because he hasn’t heard the explanation

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<sup>29</sup> Naftali and Zelikow, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Two*, 526.

<sup>30</sup> Naftali and Zelikow, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Two*, 528.

of the blockade, what that entails.”<sup>31</sup> The following discussion on the blockade seems to assume that the blockade would be used in parallel with air strikes, not as an independent solution capable of success. The President even remarks, “the blockade wouldn’t be sufficient.”<sup>32</sup> When the subject of reprisals against Berlin emerges, which the President felt was the actual reason for the placement of missiles in Cuba, Bobby once again forces the group to consider the actions that will take place after a Soviet move against Berlin occurs.

**Robert Kennedy:** Then what do we do?

**Taylor:** Go to general war, if it’s in the interest of ours.

**Unidentified:** It’s then general war. Consider the use of . . .

**President Kennedy:** You mean nuclear exchange?  
[Brief pause.]

**Taylor:** Guess you have to.

This was an important exchange, now that the group had talked through the possible reaction by the Soviets to U.S. strikes against Cuba and the likely Soviet casualties, they have arrived at the likelihood of nuclear war between superpowers. This frightening reality brings the President back to the subject of the blockade and the legality of enforcement without declaring war. Based on their interpretation of Article 8 of the Rio Treaty, the blockade could be legal after approval by the Organization of American States (OAS).

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<sup>31</sup> Naftali and Zelikow, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Two*, 533.

<sup>32</sup> Naftali and Zelikow, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Two*, 535.

As the conversation shifts back to the best timing of an air strike the Attorney General raises the issue of morality comparing a surprise attack to Pearl Harbor, asking, “what kind of a country we are...We’ve talked for 15 years that the Russians being [planning for] the first strike against us, and we’d never do that. Now, in the interest of time, we do that to a small country. I think it’s a hell of a burden to carry.”<sup>33</sup>

Bobby’s Pearl Harbor analogy had a great impact on those present. As General Taylor related years later, “it was argued very eloquently by Bobby Kennedy that that would be our doing the act of the Japanese in attacking Pearl Harbor.”<sup>34</sup> In a 1987 interview, Douglas Dillon related a similar response, “I finally agreed with Bobby Kennedy that a surprise attack on Cuba at that time was unacceptable because it was too much like the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. If we attacked like that, we would be forsaking the ideals for which I believed we had fought World War II.”<sup>35</sup> It is apparent that the morality of a surprise attack weighed heavily on Robert Kennedy’s mind. There are multiple references to “Pearl Harbor” written alone in his notes from these meetings during the crisis illustrating this important theme in his mind.<sup>36</sup> This discussion,

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<sup>33</sup> Naftali and Zelikow, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Two*, 547.

<sup>34</sup> David A. Welch, ed., *Proceedings of the Hawk’s Cay Conference on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, January 1989, 70.

<sup>35</sup> James G. Blight and David A. Welch, *On the Brink: Americans and Soviets Reexamine the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1989), 152.

<sup>36</sup> Robert Kennedy Handwritten Notes, October 16, 1962. Papers of Robert F. Kennedy. Attorney General Papers. Series 09. Attorney

and especially Bobby's statements, created a noticeable shift among the group towards supporting the blockade option.

At this stage in the crisis, Robert Kennedy appears to have made up his mind that a surprise attack against Cuba was the wrong decision. He makes multiple statements throughout the remainder of the meeting designed to combat some of the pressure on his brother to quickly commit to an invasion or air strike. The official meeting adjourns with the President asking Secretary Rusk to meet him at 4:30 to prepare for their 5:00 meeting with Gromyko.

After the President departs, the tape recording system captures the genesis of the eventual option the administration would use to resolve the crisis safely. Secretary McNamara remarks to the remaining group that "I don't think we have had enough discussion among this group, enough serious discussion, of a blockade approach versus immediate strike approach." Bundy poses the question, "well, are there people for a blockade without a strike?" To which Thompson, McNamara, and Robert Kennedy answer in the affirmative.<sup>37</sup> The discussion on the blockade continues amongst the group before many have to depart for previously scheduled engagements.

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General's Confidential File, Box 215, Folder: "Cuba: Executive committee meetings: RFK notes and memos, 1962: October-December (2 of 2 folders)" JFKL.

<sup>37</sup> Naftali and Zelikow, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Two*, 565.

Robert Kennedy deftly drove conversation among the group to force each individual to consider the possible repercussions of the contemplated actions. This change was most apparent in McNamara, who after learning of the MRBM advocated a full invasion of Cuba but was now supporting further consideration of an independent blockade. The Attorney General never overtly expressed this option during the meeting but instead used questions and insinuations that led some of the individuals to independently come to the conclusion that the blockade might represent the best alternative. After the Kennedy brothers had dinner together, the EXCOMM met again at 9:15 P.M. in the Oval Room of the Executive Mansion to avoid being noticed by reporters. The consensus was now in favor of the blockade and the President directed a detailed planning effort for its execution. The President acknowledged the shift in opinion during his midnight recorded summary of the day. "During the course of the day, opinions had obviously switched from the advantages of a first strike on the missile sites and on Cuban aviation to a blockade...The consensus was that we should go ahead with the blockade beginning on Sunday night."<sup>38</sup>

### **October 19, 1962**

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<sup>38</sup> Naftali and Zelikow, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Two*, 576-577.



The next morning at 9:45, before leaving for his scheduled campaign trip to Ohio and Illinois, Kennedy met with the Joint Chiefs and Secretary of Defense. Before meeting with the President, the Chiefs agreed on a united recommendation of a surprise airstrike against the military targets in Cuba. However, on the question of invasion, there was disagreement, with Taylor opposing this step. The Chiefs expressed their concerns that a failure to strike would not only place the United States in a weak position in Cuba but according to Taylor, further “undermine the credibility of our response in Berlin.”<sup>39</sup> Air Force Chief of Staff Curtis LeMay went further in one of the more infamous exchanges from the crisis:

**LeMay:** I think that a blockade and political talk would be considered by a lot of our friends and neutrals as being a pretty weak response to this. And I'm sure a lot of our own citizens would feel that way, too. In other words, you're in a pretty bad fix at the present time.

**President Kennedy:** What did you say?

**LeMay:** You're in a pretty bad fix.

**President Kennedy:** You're in there with me. Personally. (awkward laughter follows)<sup>40</sup>

By the end of this meeting, the President was less sure that the blockade option was the best course of action. Ted Sorensen related that following this meeting he had a discussion with the President who expressed this

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<sup>39</sup> Naftali and Zelikow, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Two*, 582.

<sup>40</sup> Sound recording, Tape 31.2. Cuba, 19 October 1962. Papers of John F. Kennedy. Presidential Papers. President's Office Files. Series 13.1. Presidential Recordings: Meetings, Box MTG, Folder: "Meetings: Tape 31. Cuba, 19 October 1962". JFKL.

uncertainty. Sorensen says, “he was counting on the Attorney General and me to pull the group together quickly—otherwise more delays and dissension would plague whatever decision he took. He wanted to act soon, Sunday if possible—and Bob Kennedy was to call him back when we were ready.”<sup>41</sup> The President's absolute trust in his brother to do what was necessary to facilitate the analysis and recommendations of his advisors are the only reason John Kennedy was able to continue the charade of campaigning and prevent knowledge of these meetings and the crisis from reaching the press or the Soviets. Furthermore, the President placed the decision of recalling him entirely in his brother's hands.

That afternoon in his Justice Department office, the Attorney General gave his theory on why the Soviets had installed the missiles to his press secretary, Edwin Guthman. “They had nothing to lose,” he said. “If we did nothing, we would be enfeebled in the eyes of the world. If we bombed, we would be the aggressors and they could do anything they wished. Or we could blockade and they could go before the United Nations and raise hell about us.”<sup>42</sup> This understanding and perception of the Soviet actions gave Bobby the ability to better analyze and

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<sup>41</sup> Theodore C. Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, 1965, 692.

<sup>42</sup> Edwin Guthman, *We Band of Brothers* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1971), 120.

understand not only their adversary's actions but also provide context for the United States' response.

Following the departure of the President, 18 members of the EXCOMM met throughout the day and night of the 19<sup>th</sup>. Initially, the group was divided into two camps, those in favor of the air strike option and those preferring a blockade. For those, especially Robert Kennedy, that supported the blockade, the necessity in gaining a positive vote by the OAS was vital to provide the legal authority for a blockade.

According to the minutes of the meeting, Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Edwin Martin gave his opinion that he could immediately secure 14 votes and could likely increase these totals to 17, 18, or 19 within 24 hours. Robert Kennedy expressed his concern that if this vote was not favorable, "the President would be placed in an impossible position."<sup>43</sup> Bundy voiced his opinion that after speaking with the President that morning, he had the impression the President wanted more work done on the air strike option and was uncommitted to the blockade. In response, Robert Kennedy, with a grin, said that "he too had had a talk with the President, indeed very recently this morning.

There seemed to be three main possibilities...one was to do nothing, and

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<sup>43</sup> "Record of Meeting, 19 October 1962, 11 a.m.," *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XI, Cuban Missile Crisis and Aftermath*, eds. Edward C. Keefer, Charles S. Sampson, Louis J. Smith, and David S. Patterson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1996), Document 31.

that would be unthinkable; another was an air strike; the third was a blockade. "He thought it would be very, very difficult indeed for the President if the decision were to be for an air strike, with all the memory of Pearl Harbor and with all the implications this would have for us in whatever world there would be afterward."<sup>44</sup> At approximately 1:00 P.M. the group divided in two to further work out both plans.

At 4:00 P.M. the group continued their discussion with each side making its case. The identification and correction of flaws in each plan provided the majority of the effort for the committee. Overall, two hours were spent on the blockade plan with only 30 minutes on the airstrike option. At the end of the discussion, the Attorney General gave his opinion that time was running out and that "in looking forward into the future it would be better for our children and grandchildren if we decided to face the Soviet threat, stand up to it, and eliminate it, now."<sup>45</sup> That evening, the Secretary of Defense and Attorney General began to view the blockade as an important first step but also understood that other measures, such as an air strike, should not be precluded by subsequent actions if necessary. The meeting ended at 7:00 P.M., and according to Arthur Lundahl's account, Bobby Kennedy was agitated and concerned over the day's discussions and felt that it was time for the President to

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<sup>44</sup> "Record of Meeting, 19 October 1962, 11 a.m.," *FRUS*, Volume XI, Document 31.

<sup>45</sup> "Record of Meeting, 19 October 1962, 11 a.m.," *FRUS*, Volume XI, Document 31.

return to Washington. After reaching the President in Chicago, Bobby expressed that “the situation had developed far more rapidly than had been expected.”<sup>46</sup> He advised the President that he cut his trip short and return to Washington.

### **October 20, 1962**

The next morning, Pierre Salinger announced to the press that the President had a cold and would be returning to the White House to recover. Marine One landed on the South Lawn of the White House at 1:30 P.M. and the President met with Sorensen to review the draft speech he had written.<sup>47</sup> At 2:30 the EXCOMM met secretly in the Executive Mansion. While this location did not have a taping system, the accounts and minutes of the meeting provide extensive details of the proceedings.

At the beginning of October 20<sup>th</sup>, there were four distinct recommended courses of action advocated by EXCOMM members. The first was the traditional air strike (Taylor and Bundy), second was a blockade combined with an ultimatum that could be followed by an air strike if necessary (Robert Kennedy, Dillon, Thompson, and McCone), third was a blockade intent on halting Soviet action to gain time for negotiation (Rusk), and fourth, blockade with the intent of initiating diplomatic negotiations, ultimately offering a trade of U.S. missiles in

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<sup>46</sup> Brugioni, *Eyeball to Eyeball*, 304.

<sup>47</sup> Sorensen, Kennedy, 693.

Europe for the removal of missiles in Cuba (McNamara, Stevenson, and Sorensen).<sup>48</sup>

The meeting began with Ray Cline giving the attendees an update on the current intelligence regarding the progress of the missile construction. Cline briefs that “in the past week we have discovered unmistakable evidence of the deployment to Cuba of medium range ballistic missiles (i.e. 1020 NM range ~~SS-4~~) and intermediate range ballistic missiles (i.e. 2200 NM range ~~SS-5~~).”<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, the discovery of what appears to be nuclear warhead storage facilities suggests that these warheads are, or will soon be, available for use. The intelligence update startlingly concludes that “we believe the evidence indicates the probability that eight MRBM missiles can be fired from Cuba today.”<sup>50</sup>

Following the intelligence briefing, Secretary McNamara explains to the President that there are still differences of opinion among the group on the best option to undertake. The President was likely well aware of the current status following the previous night’s discussion with his brother. Each scenario was discussed including the advantages and

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<sup>48</sup> Naftali and Zelikow, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Two*, 601-602.

<sup>49</sup> “[Cline], DD/I Briefing, White House, 20 October 1962 [includes handwritten notes],” *CIA Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962*, ed. Mary S. McAuliffe (Washington: History Staff, Central Intelligence Agency, 1992), Document 68.

<sup>50</sup> “[Cline], DD/I Briefing, White House, 20 October 1962,” *CIA Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, Document 68.

disadvantages of each, as identified by the advocates of each. Following the intelligence update that some of the missiles were already operational and that if no action were taken to destroy the MRBMs, fifty would be operational by December, the President felt "the missile threat became worse each day."<sup>51</sup> The situation was escalating rapidly and the time for a decision was imminent. Following a discussion of the moral necessity of providing a warning before striking to avoid a Pearl Harbor scenario, Robert Kennedy expresses his recommendation for action. According to the minutes from the meeting:

The Attorney General said that in his opinion a combination of the blockade route and the air strike route was very attractive to him. He felt we should first institute the blockade. In the event that the Soviets continued to build up the missile capability in Cuba, then we should inform the Russians that we would destroy the missiles, the launchers, and the missile sites. He said he favored a short wait during which time the Russians could react to the blockade. If the Russians did not halt the development of the missile capability, then we would proceed to make an air strike. The advantage of progressing in this way, he added, was that we would get away from the Pearl Harbor surprise attack aspect of the air strike route.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> "Minutes of the 505<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the National Security Council, Washington, October 20, 1962, 2:30-5:10 p.m.," *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XI, Cuban Missile Crisis and Aftermath*, eds. Edward C. Keefer, Charles S. Sampson, Louis J. Smith, and David S. Patterson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1996), Document 34.

<sup>52</sup> "Minutes of the 505<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the National Security Council," *FRUS*, Volume XI, Document 34.



This plan perfectly combined the strengths of the two primary options, a blockade followed by the possibility of air strikes if the Soviets refuse to comply with an ultimatum demanding the cessation of missile activity. Furthermore, this option addressed the moral arguments against a surprise attack. The Attorney General synthesized the merits of the options presented into a logical plan that addressed the concerns of the one person who had the authority to make the decision, the President.

Robert Kennedy later articulated that with this option, the decision to strike would not need to be made immediately, suggesting that the President would gain time in which to make a decision. This option provided the President with the ability to make a decision on immediate action with a blockade but still avoid a choice on airstrikes that may cause a quick escalation and confrontation between the two global powers. Bobby bought his brother time with this option, and the President would not be forced to make an irrevocable decision on airstrikes that could have far-reaching and unknown consequences; instead, the blockade would provide a less aggressive starting point.

After deciding to use the term “quarantine” instead of blockade at the suggestion of Secretary Rusk, the meeting adjourned.<sup>53</sup> The President emerged from this meeting with the opinion that his best option was the one his brother presented during the meeting and

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<sup>53</sup> “Minutes of the 505<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the National Security Council,” *FRUS*, Volume XI, Document 34.



supported by McCone, Thompson, and Dillon. Following the meeting, John McCone spoke privately with Robert Kennedy and expressed concerns over aspects of the President's drafted speech by Sorensen. The Attorney General listened to the concerns and agreed to address them with the President at their subsequent meeting. According to McCone's Memorandum for the Files from that day, "about 9:00 o'clock in the evening the AG called me at my home and said he had discussed my views with the President who concurred and he felt I could rest assured that the situation that worried me would not develop further."<sup>54</sup> Bobby then requested McCone to call the President and in the ensuing conversation the President asked McCone to visit Eisenhower again to brief him on the blockade decision. Additionally, McCone says the President stated that "he had made up his mind to pursue the course which I had recommended and he agreed with the views I expressed in the afternoon meeting. He said that he would be careful to preserve the widest possible latitude for subsequent military action at any time after the commencement of the blockade."<sup>55</sup>

### **October 21, 1962**

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<sup>54</sup> "Memorandum for the Files, Washington, October 20, 1962," *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XI, Cuban Missile Crisis and Aftermath*, eds. Edward C. Keefer, Charles S. Sampson, Louis J. Smith, and David S. Patterson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1996), Document 35.

<sup>55</sup> "Memorandum for the Files, Washington, October 20, 1962," *FRUS*, Volume XI, Document 35.

The available documentation of the events on Sunday, the 21<sup>st</sup> of October is limited since the meetings took place in areas without the recording system. At 11:30 A.M. President Kennedy, Attorney General Kennedy, General Taylor, General Sweeney, Director McCone, and Secretary McNamara met for approximately an hour in the Oval Room of the White House to discuss the viability of an aerial strike against the missile sites.<sup>56</sup> Memorandums documenting the meeting from McNamara and McCone serve to illustrate the proceedings. Secretary McNamara and General Taylor briefed the President on the airstrike option planned by the Joint Chiefs. The proposal required approximately 100 sorties to destroy the 36 missile sites and three MiG airfields identified by intelligence sources.<sup>57</sup> Once again the military advisors stressed that there was no guarantee of the destruction of all the missiles but nonetheless, indicated a 90 percent probability of success.<sup>58</sup> Bobby and McCone both "advised against a surprise attack for the reasons discussed at previous meetings. The Attorney General failed to make an

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<sup>56</sup> "Memorandum of Meeting with the President, Attorney General, Secretary McNamara, General Taylor, and Mr. McCone, 10:00 a.m. – 10/21/62," *CIA Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962*, ed. Mary S. McAuliffe (Washington: History Staff, Central Intelligence Agency, 1992), Document 71.

<sup>57</sup> "Memorandum of Meeting with the President, Attorney General, Secretary McNamara, General Taylor, and Mr. McCone," *CIA Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, Document 71.

<sup>58</sup> "Memorandum of Meeting with the President, Attorney General, Secretary McNamara, General Taylor, and Mr. McCone," *CIA Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, Document 71.

absolute recommendation with respect to future military actions, indicating this question could be decided as the situation developed from day to day, and that only preparatory steps should be taken now."<sup>59</sup> These "reasons previously discussed" are likely the comparison of any surprise attack to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. Bobby's notes show his favor for the blockade option but also acknowledge the perils of this path. However, he writes in his notes that these risks are not "as difficult as [unclear] a Pearl Harbor type attack."<sup>60</sup> As the meeting adjourned it was decided to reconvene the EXCOMM for later that day at 2:30.

In continuing with attempts to hide the crisis from the press, the afternoon meeting of the EXCOMM took place in the mansion rather than the Cabinet Room. The central topic of the discussion among the group related to the third draft of the President's speech to the nation which he planned to give the next evening. Much of the debate centered around where to place blame for the introduction of the missiles, the Soviets or Castro. The President also eliminated some of the passages

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<sup>59</sup> "Memorandum of Meeting with the President, Attorney General, Secretary McNamara, General Taylor, and Mr. McCone," *CIA Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, Document 71.

<sup>60</sup> Robert Kennedy Handwritten Notes, unlined pencil. Papers of Robert F. Kennedy. Attorney General Papers. Series 09. Attorney General's Confidential File, Box 215, Folder: "Cuba: Executive committee meetings: RFK notes and memos, 1962: October-December (2 of 2 folders)" JFKL.

"describing the horrors of war"<sup>61</sup> in order to avoid national panic. Bobby, who had been exhaustively working the Cuban problem since becoming Attorney General, suggested that the President's appeal to the Cuban people was not sufficiently personal. The President agreed with his brother and asked Sorensen to rewrite those passages. Admiral Anderson provided the President his first detailed description on the execution of the quarantine. Rules of engagement were detailed, debated, discussed, and finally, agreed upon. Later in the meeting, the Attorney General suggested that in the United States' upcoming presentation to the United Nations (U.N.), they should "take the offensive...our attitude should not be defensive, especially in view of the fact that Soviet leaders had lied to us about the deployment of strategic missiles to Cuba."<sup>62</sup> This suggestion would set the tone for Ambassador Stevenson's famous explosive presentation at the U.N. on the 25<sup>th</sup> of October.

Although support had increased, the blockade was nevertheless not a unanimous choice by the EXCOMM. Even the Vice President felt that "an unannounced strike rather than the agreed plan which involved

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<sup>61</sup> "Minutes of the 506<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the National Security Council, Washington, October 21, 1962, 2:30-4:50 p.m.," *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XI, Cuban Missile Crisis and Aftermath*, eds. Edward C. Keefer, Charles S. Sampson, Louis J. Smith, and David S. Patterson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1996), Document 38.

<sup>62</sup> "Minutes of the 506<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the National Security Council, *FRUS*, Volume XI, Document 38.

blockade and strike and invasion later if conditions warranted. He expressed displeasure at ‘telegraphing our punch’ and also commented the blockade would be ineffective because we in effect are ‘locking the barn after the horse was gone.’”<sup>63</sup>

## **October 22, 1962**

Although the President had personally called the *Post* and *Times* and obtained their agreement to hold off on publishing anything related to an impending crisis in the interest of national security,<sup>64</sup> nonetheless by Monday, the national press was starting to notice signs of something unusual. The President arrived at the Oval Office around 9:15 A.M. and began making calls. His second call that morning was to President Eisenhower to keep him abreast of the latest developments along with soliciting his thoughts on the situation. Both men, although of very different political backgrounds, trusted each other implicitly. After the President explained the plan for the blockade and possible Soviet responses, Eisenhower offered his support of Kennedy’s decision.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> “Memorandum for the File, Subject: Meeting with the Vice President on 21 October 1962,” *CIA Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962*, ed. Mary S. McAuliffe (Washington: History Staff, Central Intelligence Agency, 1992), Document 73.

<sup>64</sup> Kenneth P. O’Donnell, David F. Powers, and Joe McCarthy, *Johnny, We Hardly Knew Ye* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1972), 326.

<sup>65</sup> Philip Zelikow and Ernest May, eds., *The Presidential Recordings: John F. Kennedy, The Great Crises, Volume Three* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 11-15.

At 11:00 A.M. a small group of advisors including George Ball, McGeorge Bundy, Michael Forrestal, Roger Hilsman, Alexis Johnson, Robert Kennedy, Dean Rusk, and Arthur Schlesinger met in the Oval Office. The conversation focused on a draft address to be read at the U.N. Early in the meeting the attention centered on the wording of Schlesinger's draft. Halfway through the meeting, Bobby plays the role of devil's advocate asking, "May I just raise one question? When you're tracing the history, in view of the fact that they're going to come back on Turkey and Italy...about the fact that we've got them in Turkey and Italy, and why shouldn't they have them."<sup>66</sup> The President responds that "I think Bobby is right. You ought to devote yourself to a page on this just to answer that because it'll be on everybody's mind." Bobby eventually answers his own question, stating that the difference between the U.S. missiles and the ones in Cuba is "that we've done everything out in the open."<sup>67</sup>

The conversation soon shifts to preparation for the President's scheduled discussion with Congressional leaders at 5:00 P.M. Republican Senator Ken Keating charged, back in August, that the Soviet Union was constructing offensive nuclear bases in Cuba. To Kennedy, at the time, this seemed to be simply a case of political wrangling in hopes of negatively impacting the upcoming midterm elections for the

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<sup>66</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 24-25.

<sup>67</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 25.

Democrats. Nonetheless, at the time the President asked the CIA for more information on the status of weapons in Cuba but was told that only defensive surface-to-air missiles were revealed by the U-2 imagery.<sup>68</sup> Anticipating questioning from Senator Keating in the upcoming meeting, the Attorney General asks, “why didn’t we detect them a month ago? What is your answer?”<sup>69</sup> The group determines the appropriate response and agrees to use Bobby’s suggestion that they use “photos of the same places, taken during this last week”<sup>70</sup> as evidence that it was impossible for the administration to have discovered the missiles earlier. Especially since, according to the President, “Keating just had it right, but he had it for the wrong reasons...they [his sources] really were describing were SAM missiles.”<sup>71</sup>

The Attorney General’s notes from this meeting display his mental process of examining all sides of each option regardless of personal preferences. He methodically writes out the options available including “Do Invasion + Strike...Do Nothing...Do Something.”<sup>72</sup> Under each of these headings, he notes the advantages and disadvantages of each

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<sup>68</sup> Sheldon M. Stern, *The Week the World Stood Still* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press: 2005), 20.

<sup>69</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 30.

<sup>70</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 31.

<sup>71</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 30.

<sup>72</sup> Robert Kennedy Handwritten Notes, October 16, 1962. Papers of Robert F. Kennedy. Attorney General Papers. Series 09. Attorney General’s Confidential File, Box 215, Folder: “Cuba: Executive committee meetings: RFK notes and memos, 1962: October-December (2 of 2 folders)” JFKL.



along with possible questions outsiders might ask about each. Although Bobby advocated for the blockade he still considered all options as the crisis unfolded. This flexibility of thought made the Attorney General an excellent asset to the President. After another meeting with advisors to discuss the impact of the crisis on Berlin the President scheduled a television address to announce the crisis for 7:00 P.M. that night.

Although the Presidential advisors had met regularly about the Cuban crisis since the discovery of the missiles on October 16<sup>th</sup>, the President signed National Security Action Memorandum 196 to formally establish the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (EXCOMM). The memorandum states that the group "will meet, until further notice, daily at 10:00 a.m. in the Cabinet Room," with the President as the Chairman and regular members, the Vice President, the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of the Treasury, the Attorney General, the Director of Central Intelligence, the Under Secretary of State, the Deputy Secretary of Defense, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Ambassador-at-Large, the Special Counsel, and the Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs. According to the memorandum, the first regular meeting of the EXCOMM would occur the following day, Tuesday, October 23<sup>rd</sup>.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> National Security Action Memorandum Number 196. Papers of John F. Kennedy. Presidential Papers. National Security Files, Meetings and Memoranda Series, National Security Action Memoranda, National Security Action Memorandum Number 196. JFKL.



At 3:00 P.M. many of the members of the newly formed EXCOMM and all the Joint Chiefs of Staff met so the President could explain the rationale of the blockade decision to encourage a united message amongst the key officials of the U.S. government. According to the minutes from the meeting, the President desired for the administration to “sing one song in order to make clear that there was now no difference among his advisers as to the proper course to follow.”<sup>74</sup> In what would turn out to be a key asset in the United States’ legal argument to conduct a blockade of Cuba, during the meeting “the Attorney General said that in his opinion our blockade action would be illegal if it were not supported by the OAS. In his view the greatest importance is attached to our obtaining the necessary fourteen favorable votes in the OAS.”<sup>75</sup> The President read the group a list of possible questions they might receive, many that were posed by Bobby in previous meetings, and the appropriate justification for their response.<sup>76</sup> The Attorney General’s protectiveness of his brother was apparent when he again invokes the Pearl Harbor analogy to the group saying, “when somebody brings up

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<sup>74</sup> “Minutes of the 507<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the National Security Council, Washington, October 22, 1962, 3 p.m.,” *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XI, Cuban Missile Crisis and Aftermath*, eds. Edward C. Keefer, Charles S. Sampson, Louis J. Smith, and David S. Patterson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1996), Document 41.

<sup>75</sup> “Minutes of the 507<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the National Security Council, Washington, October 22, 1962, 3 p.m.,” *FRUS*, Volume XI, Document 41.

<sup>76</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 41.

why you didn't have an attack or why you didn't have an air strike, to say that it was just not considered on the basis of the fact that we couldn't have the Pearl Harbor kind of operation."<sup>77</sup> Bobby wants to ensure his brother avoids making any decisions that will destroy his legacy such as a surprise attack costing the lives of innocent civilians. This meeting served as a test run for the upcoming meeting with Congressional leadership for the President in front of a generally friendly audience.

The President's final meeting before addressing the American public was with twenty Congressmen recalled from around the country for this rapidly arranged discussion. According to Kenneth O'Donnell, this meeting "itself was not pleasant."<sup>78</sup> The meeting was filled with second guessing and politically motivated statements. After a detailed explanation of the planned blockade, the chairman of the Armed Services Committee Senator Richard Russell voiced his opinion that "our responsibilities to our people demand stronger steps than that."<sup>79</sup> Later, the Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, Senator J. William Fulbright also voiced his disagreement saying, "a blockade seems to me the worst alternative."<sup>80</sup> Robert Kennedy summed up the meeting in his book *Thirteen Days*, "this was the most difficult meeting. I did not

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Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 51.

<sup>78</sup> O'Donnell, Powers, and McCarthy, *Johnny, We Hardly Knew Ye*, 327.

<sup>79</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 72.

<sup>80</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 86.

attend, but I know from seeing him afterward that it was a tremendous strain.”<sup>81</sup> Following this very contentious meeting, President Kennedy, less than thirty minutes later, would give one of his most powerful and memorable speeches to the American people and the world.

At 7:00 P.M. that evening, President Kennedy addressed the nation, laying out the case against the Soviet Union and describing their deception in Cuba. The President listed seven actions to be taken immediately:

- 1) Strict quarantine on all offensive military equipment under shipment to Cuba
- 2) Continued and increased close surveillance of Cuba and its military buildup
- 3) It shall be the policy of this nation to regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western Hemisphere as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States.
- 4) Reinforcement of Guantanamo, evacuation of dependents of personnel there, ordered additional military units to be on standby alert basis
- 5) We are calling tonight for an immediate meeting of the Organ of Consultation, under the Organization of American States, to consider this threat to hemispheric security and to invoke articles six and eight of the Rio Treaty in support of all necessary action.
- 6) Under the Charter of the United Nations, we are asking tonight that an emergency meeting of the Security Council be convoked without delay to take action against this latest Soviet threat to world peace.

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<sup>81</sup> Robert F. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 42.

- 7) I call upon Chairman Khrushchev to halt and eliminate this clandestine, reckless, and provocative threat to world peace and to stable relations between our two nations. I call upon him further to abandon this course of world domination and to join in an historic effort to end the perilous arms race and transform the history of man.<sup>82</sup>

That night about 1:00 A.M. the U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union, Foy Kohler, provided the Presidium with a transcript of Kennedy's speech along with a personal letter from the President to Khrushchev.<sup>83</sup> While the Soviet Premier was relieved that there was no imminent invasion of Cuba, he spent that night in his office. In his memoir, Khrushchev recalls, "I slept on a couch in my office—and I kept my clothes on...I was ready for alarming news to come any moment, and I wanted to be ready to react immediately." Although both sides were relieved that the night ended without military action by either country, tensions in the crisis were still peaking.

### **October 23, 1962**

At 10:00 A.M. the EXCOMM met officially for the first time. To the Kennedy brothers, the Republican McCone, who said he had previously suspected the Soviets of placing offensive weapons in Cuba before the discovery on the 16th, might pose a threat to the administration's unified narrative. Especially since during the previous day's meeting, McCone said, "I wouldn't be too categoric that we had no information because, as

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<sup>82</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 94-95.

<sup>83</sup> O'Donnell, Powers, and McCarthy, *Johnny, We Hardly Knew Ye*, 329.

a matter of fact, there were some 15, I think, various refugee reports that circulated around that were indicative that something was going on.”<sup>84</sup> The meeting opened with an intelligence update from Director McCone regarding the status and activity of Soviet personnel in Cuba. About five minutes in, Robert Kennedy is heard on tape asking his brother “should I go now?” to which the President responds, “yeah, you might as well get that over with because I think we’ll probably need John McCone.”<sup>85</sup> As McCone completes his briefing the Attorney General on cue asks, “The question that I’ve heard raised rather extensively is why this was not uncovered sooner, when there were some reports about it, to why we didn’t know about it, and therefore why a blockade of some kind was not instituted earlier.”<sup>86</sup> This exchange indicates a premeditated plan by the Kennedy’s to test McCone’s response to a politically sensitive question regarding a failure to discover the missiles sooner. The President once again relied on his most trusted ally to test the allegiance of the CIA Director without asking the question himself. After McCone proved himself, saying in a meeting with members of Congress that “we had no

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<sup>84</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 45.

<sup>85</sup> Sound recording, Tape 34.1. Cuba (NSC ExComm), 23 October 1962. Papers of John F. Kennedy. Presidential Papers. President's Office Files. Series 13.1. Presidential Recordings: Meetings, Box MTG, Folder: "Meetings: Tape 34.1. Cuba (NSC ExComm), 23 October 1962". JFKL.

<sup>86</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 104.

positive evidence,”<sup>87</sup> the President decided to send him to meet with additional Congressman to explain the rationale for the blockade.

Robert Kennedy continues to address the tough questions that in his mind the group will undoubtedly receive. Saying, “the fact that they’re doing this. We’ve taken this action after they’ve got their missiles already there, unopposed. I think probably we get by with this answer for about 24 hours. But we’re going to have difficulty after that.”<sup>88</sup> The President’s answer to this question is, “there’s no action we ever could have taken, unless we’d have invaded Cuba a year ago, to prevent them from being there.”<sup>89</sup> The group now had their answer. As the meeting ends, the President tentatively sets 6:00 P.M. for the committee to reconvene after the OAS makes their decision on support of the blockade.<sup>90</sup>

That afternoon news arrived that the OAS had passed the U.S. resolution with only yes votes and two abstentions. These two abstentions eventually changed to affirmative votes thus giving the United States unanimous support for the quarantine.<sup>91</sup> The EXCOMM meeting resumed at 6:00 P.M. and spent just over an hour discussing the drafting of a proclamation instituting the quarantine for 2:00 P.M.

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<sup>87</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 106.

<sup>88</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 108.

<sup>89</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 112.

<sup>90</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 127.

<sup>91</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 148.

Greenwich time on the 24<sup>th</sup>.<sup>92</sup> Later that evening President Kennedy signed the quarantine proclamation in the Oval Office in front of photographers. Understanding the historical significance of the moment, he placed the pen in his pocket and said, "I am going to keep this one."<sup>93</sup>

After the signing and a brief phone call from the First Lady, the President rejoined his brother in the Cabinet Room. In the company of only his brother the President was finally able to voice his frustration with the situation and doubts in the decision he made.

**President Kennedy:** Ah, looks like hell—looks real mean, doesn't it?

**Robert Kennedy:** Well, there isn't any choice. I mean, you would have been, you would have been impeached.

**President Kennedy:** That's what I think. I would have been impeached. I think they would have moved to impeach. I wouldn't be surprised if they didn't move to impeach right after this election, on the grounds that I said . . . and didn't do it and let . . . I mean, I'd be . . .

**Robert Kennedy:** I don't think that [unclear]. You know that's a . . . If we'd gone in and done something else, or taken some other step that wasn't necessary, and then you'd be . . .

**President Kennedy:** Yeah.

**Robert Kennedy:** Yeah. But now, the fact is that you couldn't have done any less. The fact that you got all those South American countries and Central American countries to vote unanimously [in the OAS]. When they've been kicking us in the ass for two years, and they vote unanimously for this. And then to get the reaction from the rest of the allies, you know like David Ormsby-Gore and everybody else. Saying that you had to do it. You calculate . . . I mean, if it's going

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<sup>92</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 152.

<sup>93</sup> Stern, *The Week the World Stood Still*, 105.



to come at you, it was going to come as something you couldn't have avoided.<sup>94</sup>

The President could only allow himself to appear vulnerable and honest in front of his younger brother. Bobby understood that his brother needed a confidence boost and he provides that by pointing to the victory in the OAS, even though Bobby himself provided the emphasis to gain their support and the support of their allies. The special relationship between the brothers gave the President exactly what he needed during one of the most stressful days of the crisis.

### **October 24, 1962**

The next day the EXCOMM met again at the regularly scheduled time of 10:00 A.M. just as the quarantine went into effect. In *Thirteen Days*, Robert Kennedy said this “meeting, along with that of the following Saturday, October 27, seemed the most trying, the most difficult, and most filled with tension.”<sup>95</sup> Secretary McNamara told the group that two of the Soviet ships they were tracking, the *Gagarin* and *Kimovsk*, were approaching the 500-mile barrier where the quarantine began. Naval intelligence also reported the belief that a submarine was trailing each of these two ships. As McNamara starts to describe how the intercept of these ships will take place, Director McCone interrupts him, "Mr. President, I have a note just handed to me from . . . [unclear]. It says that

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<sup>94</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 177.

<sup>95</sup> Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 52.



we've just received information through ONI that all six Soviet ships currently identified in Cuban waters—and I don't know what that means—have either stopped, or reversed course.”<sup>96</sup> Confusion among the group over exactly what the message meant led McCone to rush out of the room to get clarification. As the group waits for this information, McNamara continues to detail the procedure to drop depth charges and use sonar signals to warn the submarines to surface. During this discussion, Robert Kennedy wrote in his notes:

I sat across from the President, it was Wednesday night, October 24. Two Soviet ships had approached to a few miles of the quarantine line. This was the moment we had prepared for, which we hoped would never come. The danger and concern that we all felt hung like a cloud over us all. . . . These few minutes were the time of greatest worry by the President. His hand went up to his face & covered his mouth and he closed his fist. His eyes were tense, almost gray, and we just stared at each other across the table. Was the world on the brink of a holocaust and had we done something wrong? Isn't there some way we can avoid having our first exchange be with a Russian submarine—almost anything but that, he said. . . . We had come to the edge of final decision—& the President agreed. I felt we were on the edge of a precipice and it was as if there were no way off.<sup>97</sup>

According to his account in *Thirteen Days* Bobby says he began to think “of when he [President Kennedy] was ill and almost died; when he lost his child; when we learned that our oldest brother had been killed; of

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<sup>96</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 191.

<sup>97</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr, *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1978), 514.

personal times of strain and hurt.”<sup>98</sup> This moment in the crisis the two brothers were both momentarily hit by the gravity of the situation but quickly reengaged in the discussion.

As the details on forcing the submarines to surface continue, the President emphasized that “we don’t want to have the first thing we attack as a Soviet submarine. I’d much rather have a merchant ship.”<sup>99</sup> In the end, the President relents and allows the on-scene naval commanders to retain the latitude to make the necessary decision. The Attorney General follows with a question, that although it would seem to be common sense, was critical. “I presume that somebody on the destroyer speaks Russian.” The President follows, “May we get this matter of procedure to the quickest possible point? You can get a Russian-speaking person on every one of these ships?”<sup>100</sup> McNamara and Bundy answer affirmatively and the discussion shifts to concerns over a Soviet response to blockade Berlin. Finally, McCone returns stating that according to the Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI), “well, they either stopped them [ships] or reversed direction.” This development was far from a resolution to the crisis but a sense of positive progress came across the room. According to Bobby, “everyone looked like a different

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<sup>98</sup> Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 54.

<sup>99</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 94.

<sup>100</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 195.

person. For a moment the world had stood still, and now it was going around again.”<sup>101</sup>

At 9:24 that evening a letter from Chairman Khrushchev to President Kennedy arrived. The rambling and emotional letter accused the United States of attempting to intimidate the Soviet Union through “outright banditry.” Khrushchev goes on to say that the quarantine “is an act of aggression, pushing mankind towards the abyss of a world missile nuclear war. Consequently, the Soviet government cannot give instructions to the captains of Soviet vessels bound for Cuba to observe the instructions of the American naval forces blockading that island.” Regarding the response of Soviet vessels to attempts by American ships to stop them, he says “we will then be forced for our part to take the measures which we deem necessary and adequate in order to protect our rights.”<sup>102</sup> The letter implied that the Soviet Union intended to challenge the quarantine, and suddenly the goodwill felt when the ships had turned away earlier in the day evaporated.

### **October 25, 1962**

At approximately 2:00 A.M. Thursday morning, President Kennedy drafted and sent a short one-page response to Khrushchev's letter from

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<sup>101</sup> Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 55.

<sup>102</sup> Letter from Khrushchev to Kennedy, October 24, 1962. Papers of Robert F. Kennedy. Attorney General Papers. Series 09. Attorney General's Confidential File, Box 217, Folder: “Cuba: Cuban Crisis, 1962: Kennedy-Khrushchev Letter, Etc.” John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

the previous evening. The letter laid out the sequence of events that led to the United States' decision to enact the quarantine. Kennedy asks Khrushchev "to recognize clearly...that it was not I who issued the first challenge in this case, and that in the light of this record these activities in Cuba required the responses I have announced." He finishes the letter saying, "I hope that your Government will take the necessary action to permit a restoration of the earlier situation."<sup>103</sup> The intensity of the situation was peaking; the Kennedy administration could only watch to see what the next Soviet ship would do upon reaching the quarantine line.

That morning at approximately 6:00 A.M. in Washington D.C., U.S. naval ships intercepted the Soviet tanker *Bucharest*. McNamara explained that the ship was queried and responded that it was carrying petroleum products and was bound for Havana. Based on the President's instructions the tanker was permitted to pass without inspection with the U.S. destroyer maintaining surveillance.<sup>104</sup> A discussion followed focused on whether the *Bucharest* should be searched and if not, would this display weakness to the Soviets and International community. Once again Robert Kennedy provided a

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<sup>103</sup> Letter from Kennedy to Khrushchev, October 25, 1962. Papers of Robert F. Kennedy. Attorney General Papers. Series 09. Attorney General's Confidential File, Box 217, Folder: "Cuba: Cuban Crisis, 1962: Kennedy-Khrushchev Letter, Etc." John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

<sup>104</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 237.

strategy to demonstrate that the quarantine was successful while also creating more time for the President to analyze the situation before committing to other actions. According to Bobby's logic, because Petroleum, Oil, and Lubricants (POL) were not included in the quarantine proclamation as prohibited cargo, they could "establish the fact that we're not going to board tankers for—because of POL [not being prohibited]." <sup>105</sup> To create the perception that the quarantine was working the Attorney General adds, "and I suppose we can say that, obviously, as of the present time, the Russians are observing the quarantine. They've sent all their other ships back." The President following this logic responded, "giving us more time." <sup>106</sup> Upon reaching the decision to allow the *Bucharest* to continue towards Havana, the group shifted focus to the next inbound ship the *Grozny* which, according to McNamara, may be transporting missile fuel. Robert Kennedy pointed out that things relating to the quarantine haven't "come to a head" <sup>107</sup> until they actually board one of the ships. The group agrees that the *Bucharest* should be allowed to continue, but the President wanted by the next night "to have a ship to grab, depending on what happens tomorrow afternoon," <sup>108</sup> in order to provide a

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<sup>105</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 248.

<sup>106</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 248-249.

<sup>107</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 250.

<sup>108</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 250.

demonstration of U.S. resolve. Bobby sums up the discussion saying, “the point is that we may eventually have to intercept a ship. And we’d like to intercept a ship that had something rather than a lot of baby food for children.”<sup>109</sup> As the morning meeting wrapped up, the President had the letter received the previous night from Khrushchev, and his response read to the group. The meeting concluded with the President’s frustrated statement “we don’t want to precipitate an incident...we still have then another six or seven hours. I think the only arguments for not taking it...this is not the appropriate time to blow up a ship.”<sup>110</sup>

The EXCOMM reconvened at 5:00 P.M. with the President absent for the first part because he was watching the live television coverage of the U.N. Security Council. The President watched Adlai Stevenson's showdown with Soviet Ambassador Zorin where Stevenson famously challenged his Soviet counterpart over questions on the existence of missiles in Cuba, saying to the Soviet, “I am prepared to wait for my answer until hell freezes over.”<sup>111</sup>

After the President arrived and turned on the taping system, the conversation again addressed whether to stop a ship approaching the quarantine line. This time the vessel in question was an East German passenger ship. McNamara voices his opinion that stopping a passenger

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<sup>109</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 255.

<sup>110</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 268-269.

<sup>111</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 270.

ship was not the ideal test case. However, the President acknowledges that “we’ve got to prove sooner or later that the blockade works.”<sup>112</sup> Perhaps sensing that the group’s thinking was stagnating, Bobby asks, “Can I give another side of it?”<sup>113</sup> Concerned that, while the quarantine prevented the introduction of more missiles, according to intelligence the work on the existing missile sites was continuing and had even ramped up during the stalemate. The Attorney General suggests that perhaps it might “be better, rather than have the confrontation with Russians at sea, that it might be better to have knocked out their missile base.” To avoid the moral dilemma of a surprise attack he suggests they “tell them to get out of the vicinity in ten minutes, and then we go through and knock the base.”<sup>114</sup> The President, who had previously decided against the air strikes because of the uncertainty in destroying all of the missile sites, was intrigued by his brother’s proposal. The debate continues between the airstrike option and adding POL to the list of restricted cargos. The President’s concern over intelligence showing that work was speeding up at the missile sites leads him to comment, “I think if the work continues, we either have to do this air business or we have to put POL on...otherwise the work’s going on and we’re not really doing anything about it.”<sup>115</sup> Robert Kennedy feared that as time went on the

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<sup>112</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 273.

<sup>113</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 273.

<sup>114</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 274.

<sup>115</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 278.



United States while preventing more missiles from entering Cuba, was allowing the Soviets to make more of the missile sites operational. While the Attorney General was an advocate for the blockade, he never eliminated follow-on airstrikes if the blockade alone did not gain the desired results. As the quarantine appeared to be working to stop the flow into Cuba, the attention of the Kennedys had now shifted to the problem of the missiles that were still in Cuba.

### **October 26, 1962**

At approximately 7:00 A.M. Friday morning the United States finally had an option to demonstrate a willingness to board and inspect ships crossing into the quarantine zone. The *Marucla*, a Lebanese cargo ship, was Panamanian owned, and operating under a Soviet charter provided an answer to the dilemma of selecting the first ship to inspect. Robert Kennedy wrote, "He [the President] was demonstrating to Khrushchev that we were going to enforce the quarantine and yet, because it was not a Soviet-owned vessel, it did not represent a direct affront to the Soviets, requiring a response from them. It gave them more time but simultaneously demonstrated that the U.S. meant business."<sup>116</sup> The inspection went as well as the administration could have hoped. In a bit of irony, one of the two naval destroyers that performed the inspection was the USS *Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr.*, named in

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<sup>116</sup> Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 64.



honor of the eldest Kennedy brother who perished while flying a mission in World War II.

The EXCOMM met again at their regular 10:00 A.M. time and began with a review of the intelligence gathered the previous day. According to a CIA report prepared at 2:00 A.M., “photography of four MRBM sites shows continued rapid construction activity at each site. This activity apparently continues to be directed toward achieving a full operational capability as soon as possible.” Additionally, the report observes, “as yet there is no evidence indicating any intention to move or dismantle these sites.”<sup>117</sup> Bobby wrote, at this time, of his feeling “that a direct military confrontation between the two great military powers was inevitable.”<sup>118</sup>

The President’s frustration grows during the discussion of the U.N. attempt to negotiate peace between the countries and the United States’ requirements for lifting the quarantine. President Kennedy’s judgment on the limitations of the quarantine was voiced, “Well, now the quarantine itself won’t remove the weapons. So we’ve only got two ways of removing the weapons. One is to negotiate them out—in other words, trade them out. Or the other is to go in and take them out. I don’t see

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<sup>117</sup> “Supplement 6 to Joint Evaluation of Soviet Missile Threat in Cuba,” *CIA Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962*, ed. Mary S. McAuliffe (Washington: History Staff, Central Intelligence Agency, 1992), Document 94.

<sup>118</sup> Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 64.

any other way you're going to get the weapons out."<sup>119</sup> External pressure from allies and U.N Secretary Thant continued to mount for the United States to agree to the U.N. standstill proposal. According to Stevenson, the three primary parts of this standstill included the suspension of the quarantine, no further construction on the bases, and no more arm shipments. But this proposal as explained by Stevenson was met by incredulity by many of the EXCOMM members in a very tense exchange among the members.<sup>120</sup> Bundy summed up the problem with the proposal stating, "the proposal which is before us from the U.N., it does involve a dropping of the quarantine, without what I would call adequate momentum. Very far from it."<sup>121</sup> Meanwhile, many in the group argued this proposal will only allow the Soviets to finish their work to have all missiles operational and as McCone described pointed "right now at our hearts."<sup>122</sup> After Stevenson left the room to take a call the President summed up the consensus of the group saying, "Governor Stevenson has this proposal for dealing with...which nobody is very much interested in."<sup>123</sup> Instead, the group settled that to agree to any standstill there

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<sup>119</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 312.

<sup>120</sup> Sound recording, Tape 39.1. Cuba (NSC ExComm), 26 October 1962. Papers of John F. Kennedy. Presidential Papers. President's Office Files. Series 13.1. Presidential Recordings: Meetings, Box MTG, Folder: "Meetings: Tape 39.1. Cuba (NSC ExComm), 26 October 1962". JFKL.

<sup>121</sup> Sound recording, Tape 39.1, JFKL.

<sup>122</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 312.

<sup>123</sup> Sound recording, Tape 39.1, JFKL.

must be an additional condition, against Stevenson's protestations, that the missiles must be made inoperable during the negotiations.

Following this morning meeting, the group broke up with many focusing on plans for an air strike against the Cuban missile sites. Director McCone and his top photo analyst Arthur Lundahl met briefly around noon with the President and Attorney General to detail the findings on the increased pace of construction observed in Cuba. When the President asked McCone for his conclusion from the evidence he replied, "It appears to me that there's a very great deal of concern about this thing. I'm getting more concerned all the time... I think that they've got a substantial number of these, that they could start at dark and have missiles pointing at us the following morning."<sup>124</sup> It is obvious the President shared the Director's pessimistic read of the current situation.

There are only two ways to do this, as I said this morning. One is the diplomatic way. Which I doubt, I don't think it will be successful. The other way is, I would think, a combination of an air strike and probably invasion, which means that we would have to carry out both of those with the prospect that they [the missiles] might be fired.<sup>125</sup>

Preparation continued with a general feeling among most of the EXCOMM that the crisis was approaching an inevitable military confrontation. The situation, however, were about to take a dramatic change once again.

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<sup>124</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 328.

<sup>125</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 328.

Between 6:00 and 9:00 P.M. a lengthy letter from Khrushchev to Kennedy was received by the State Department in four sections. The contents of the letter were full of rhetoric, at times emotional, but still generally coherent. Khrushchev argued that the missiles in Cuba were for the defense of the island and that “the same forms of weapons can have different interpretations.” The Soviet leader expressed a desire to avoid war and to continue “to compete with your country on a peaceful basis.” He acknowledged that both sides understand “that if we attack you, you will respond the same way.” In the final section of the letter, Khrushchev proposes,

We, for our part, will declare that our ships, bound for Cuba, will not carry any kind of armaments. You would declare that the United States will not invade Cuba with its forces and will not support any sort of forces which might intend to carry out an invasion of Cuba. Then the necessity for the presence of our military specialists in Cuba would disappear.<sup>126</sup>

Based on Robert Kennedy’s account, it appears he was with the President when the translated letter from the State Department was received. He recalled the impact of the letter, “I was slightly more optimistic because when I left the President that night, he too was for the first time hopeful that our efforts might possibly be successful.”<sup>127</sup> That

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<sup>126</sup> Department of State Telegram from Moscow to Secretary of State. Papers of Robert F. Kennedy. Attorney General Papers. Series 09. Attorney General’s Confidential File, Box 217, Folder: “Cuba: Cuban Crisis, 1962: Kennedy-Khrushchev Letter, Etc.” JFKL.

<sup>127</sup> Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 69.

night ended with a sense of optimism among the President and his advisors. However, developments the next day would once again bring more uncertainty.

### **October 27, 1962**

The EXCOMM met at their normal 10:00 A.M. and began the meeting with the customary intelligence update from McCone. According to the CIA report, the mobilization of the Cuban military forces continued to increase, but the Cuban soldiers were under orders not to take any independent hostile action without permission from the Soviet Union. Contrary to Khrushchev's assurance to Thant that he would halt Soviet ships from approaching the quarantine zone, the United States had "no information as yet that the six Soviet and three satellite ships en route have changed course [away from Cuba]." <sup>128</sup>

The meeting was interrupted when Theodore Sorensen handed President Kennedy a news ticker copy. The President immediately read the contents aloud to the assembled group, "Premier Khrushchev told President Kennedy yesterday he would withdraw offensive weapons from Cuba if the United States withdrew its rockets from Turkey." <sup>129</sup>

Confusion infected the room with some commenting that the trade for

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<sup>128</sup> "Central Intelligence Agency Memorandum: The Crisis USSR/Cuba, 27 October 1962," *CIA Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962*, ed. Mary S. McAuliffe (Washington: History Staff, Central Intelligence Agency, 1992), 99.

<sup>129</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 359.

missiles in Turkey wasn't in the letter from the previous night. Realizing he only had a small amount of information the President remarked, "well, let's just sit tight on it. We just have nothing to go on."<sup>130</sup> As more information became available, the President added, "Well, this is unsettling now, George [Ball], because he's got us in a pretty good spot here. Because most people would regard this as not an unreasonable proposal." Bobby, who aside from attending the EXCOMM meetings, was working a private channel with the Soviet ambassador, voiced his opinion on the issue of the Turkish missiles. This view would mirror his conversations with the Soviet diplomat.

The first point being that this is a question of Cuba and the bases and must be resolved within the next few days. This can't wait. The negotiations and discussions must get on, and the work that is continuing despite our protests has been going on. So therefore it's got to be resolved, and quickly. This action that has been taken is not an action just by the United States but it is an action by all of the Latin American countries plus the United States. This has nothing to do with the security of the countries of Europe, which do have their own problems. We would obviously consider negotiating the giving up of bases in Turkey if we can assure the Turks and the other European countries for whom these bases were emplaced, if there can be some assurances given to them for their own security. This will entail inspection, as we anticipate that there will be some inspection in Cuba and in the United States at the time that these bases are withdrawn from Cuba, and we give assurances that we are not going to invade Cuba. Something along those lines.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 359.

<sup>131</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 368-369.

After Secretary Rusk was able to get copies of Khrushchev's full letter he passed them out to the committee. The new proposal read:

We agree to remove from Cuba those means which you regard as offensive means; we agree to carry this out and make a pledge in the U.N. Your representatives will make a declaration to the effect that the U.S.A., on its part, considering the uneasiness and anxiety of the Soviet State, will remove its similar means from Turkey.<sup>132</sup>

With frustration mounting in the room, Robert Kennedy began to assert himself more than at any other point during the EXCOMM meetings.

The conversation consequently shifted to drafting a response to Khrushchev with Bobby leading much of the effort and discussion. Even the other EXCOMM members begin to defer to Bobby in a way they had not previously. Many of the themes and even wording suggested by the Attorney General are apparent in the final version of the letter.

Throughout the discussion, Bobby continued to push for them to frame their letter as a response to the original letter rather than the second one which referenced a trade of the Turkish missiles. Douglas Dillon later recalled that "It was Bobby Kennedy's idea, I think, to answer only the first letter and not the second and to go to the Russians with a strong

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<sup>132</sup> Letter from Premier Khrushchev to President Kennedy, October 27, 1962. Papers of John F. Kennedy. Presidential Papers. National Security Files. Series 01. Countries, Box 47, Folder: "Cuba: Subjects: Composite of exchange correspondence between President Kennedy, Khrushchev, U Thant, and Castro, through 28 October 1962." JFKL.



ultimatum."<sup>133</sup> Bobby appeared to sense that his brother was heavily considering acquiescing to a public agreement to trade the Turkish missiles. Therefore, he makes the point that it was better to make at least an attempt to reach an accord under the original terms because "it's certainly conceivable that you could get him back to that [the first letter]. I don't think we should abandon it." Because if that doesn't work they "can always go to that [the Turkish missile trade]."<sup>134</sup> Bobby was more assertive as the drafting of the response continues, "Send this letter and say you're accepting his offer [from the first letter]. He's made an offer and you're in fact accepting it...He made an offer last night. This letter accepts the offer."<sup>135</sup>

The Attorney General's unique relationship with the President becomes again apparent when he remarked, about drafting the letter, "why do we bother you with it, Mr. President? Why don't you let us work this out...why don't we try to work it out for you without you being there to pick it apart." To which the President replied over laughter, "and then you're going to have to worry about old Adlai."<sup>136</sup> Only the President's brother could make that statement and get away with it, but after hours

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<sup>133</sup> Blight and Welch, *On the Brink*, 162.

<sup>134</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 428-429.

<sup>135</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 434-435.

<sup>136</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 436.



together in the Cabinet Room, a sense of humor was greatly needed to cut through the tension and stress.

Bobby was the only EXCOMM member that seriously considered public opinion and the political ramifications of the administration's decisions, in this case, the reaction to a public trade of missiles. According to Dillon, speaking at the Hawk's Cay Conference in 1987, Bobby "paid a certain amount of attention to that, because he was so close to his brother; but we others—Bob McNamara, Mac Bundy, and I, and the rest—that wasn't our role, and we didn't discuss it [public opinion]."<sup>137</sup> For those not considering this aspect of a proposed deal and the implications that a public trade would have on international opinion, especially that of the United States' allies, the trade seemed entirely logical. However, Robert Kennedy was well aware of the adverse effects associated with any such deal and worked to ensure the President attempted to avoid it.

The EXCOMM performed its intended role admirably. During the meetings, with and without the President, the group considered a tremendous number of scenarios along with the advantages and disadvantages of each. The President was provided with executable options along with many of the implications involved with each. Having his most trusted advisor Bobby involved gave the President a unique and

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<sup>137</sup> David A. Welch, ed., *Proceedings of the Hawk's Cay Conference on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, January 1989, 66.

critical tool during the crisis. Years later, Edwin Guthman describes Robert Kennedy's opinion on the strength of EXCOMM as "how well it had functioned, how close the members had become, how open and unpretentious their discussions had been,"<sup>138</sup> and ultimately how successful they were.



Figure 3. October 29<sup>th</sup>, 1962 EXCOMM Meeting  
*Cecil Stoughton. White House Photographs. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston*

Eventually, Bobby and Sorensen left the room to complete the draft response to Khrushchev. When the two returned and handed the President the letter he quickly responded, "This letter, it is ready go isn't

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<sup>138</sup> Edwin Guthman, *We Band of Brothers* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1971), 128.

it?”<sup>139</sup> The absolute trust Kennedy had in his brother was apparent in this single question. This letter was one of the most critical communications of his Presidency, yet his faith in Bobby was so high that he hardly feels the need to review it and only does so after Sorensen remarked, “we just had one last line, Mr. President, that Bobby thought you would want to look at.”<sup>140</sup>

At approximately 7:20 P.M. the President approved the final version of the letter to Khrushchev bearing many of the suggestions Robert advocated throughout the previous few hours.<sup>141</sup> The letter was transmitted to the Soviet Union at 8:00 P.M. coinciding with the time that Robert Kennedy was meeting with Ambassador Dobrynin, at the President’s request, to provide a copy of the letter.<sup>142</sup> This meeting and the numerous others between the two key figures would prove to be the most important events to resolving the crisis peacefully. Robert Kennedy’s role in shaping the dialogue and narrative in the EXCOMM meetings brilliantly worked in concert with his efforts communicating with the Soviet Union through a secret back-channel with Ambassador Dobrynin.

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<sup>139</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 455.

<sup>140</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 455.

<sup>141</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 477.

<sup>142</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 482.

## Chapter 4

### The Robert Kennedy Back-Channel

*This channel proved to be useful, in my view, helping each side to have a better feel for the tense situation during the Caribbean crisis.*

Anatoly Dobrynin

Robert Kennedy was an integral part of the EXCOMM and the role the group played in advising the President. However, while many of his fellow advisors knew of his meetings with the Soviet Ambassador, few if any understood the importance of what they were discussing and the important role this communication channel would have on the peaceful resolution to the crisis. Secrecy was crucial during the crisis, but never more so than the negotiations that occurred through the Robert Kennedy-Anatoly Dobrynin channel. At stake was the NATO alliance, international prestige, and domestic political reputation. The direct communication provided by these two men delivered one the greatest contributions to the crisis resolution.

There has been much debate on the existence of an agreement between the Soviet Union and the United States for a missile trade during the Cuban Missile Crisis. For decades, both sides vehemently denied the existence of any such agreement, and information contradicting that stance was protected or eliminated. However, as more information has emerged, the negotiations conducted by Robert Kennedy are shown to have often centered on a diplomatic solution involving a quid pro quo agreement on missile removal. The skillful maneuvering

and negotiation conducted by the Attorney General allowed both nations to reach an acceptable solution to the escalating crisis. Without Bobby's developed relationships and communication channels with the Soviets, this private agreement would have been impossible.

President Kennedy's predecessor, President Dwight Eisenhower publicly pledged to extend the nuclear deterrent to the United States' NATO allies including the installation of missiles in Turkey. In late 1957, Eisenhower, in an effort to create an American-controlled stockpile of nuclear weapons in Europe while simultaneously removing the incentive for other countries to feel a need to develop their own nuclear capability, made an offer to all NATO allies. For those agreeing to provide launch sites on their territory, the United States would base Thor and Jupiter missiles with the additional promise that the United States would provide the necessary information for the allies to build a nuclear submarine propulsion system. Only the Italians and Turks agreed to accept the missiles; the other allies feared being targeted by the Soviets because of the presence of the weapons and declined the offer.<sup>1</sup> The utility of the missiles was questioned even at the time of installation. Many considered the missiles "vulnerable, slow reacting weapons."<sup>2</sup> Although

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<sup>1</sup> John Newhouse, *War and Peace in the Nuclear Age* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 132.

<sup>2</sup> Newhouse, *War and Peace in the Nuclear Age*, 132.

Kennedy inherited this missile agreement, it would eventually provide leverage for the peaceful resolution of the conflict.

The Kennedy Administration's back-channel communications through Robert Kennedy originated in spring 1961. The catalyst in developing a relationship between Kennedy and the Soviets was New York *Daily News* Washington Bureau correspondent Frank Holeman. Holeman had formed a friendship with Soviet agent Georgi Bolshakov after meeting at a luncheon hosted by the Soviet embassy in the early 1950s. Their meetings provided mutually beneficial information. Bolshakov received insight into American politics from a Washington insider with deep insight and perspective, while Holeman learned "about what lurked behind the façade of official Soviet positions."<sup>3</sup>

Bolshakov, a member of the Soviet Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU), was first sent on assignment to Washington in 1951, posing as an editor for the TASS Soviet news agency. In this role, he was expected to create and foster intelligence sources and report the information back to Moscow.<sup>4</sup> When Kennedy was elected, Holeman, through his friendship with Robert Kennedy's press secretary Edwin Guthman, felt that Kennedy might be receptive to a meeting with Bolshakov. Brokering this relationship would provide Holeman with an unprecedented level of

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<sup>3</sup> Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro, & Kennedy 1958-1964* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 111.

<sup>4</sup> Fursenko and Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble*, 110.

insight and perspective on the United States-Soviet Union relationship. On April 29, 1961, Holeman asked Bolshakov, “[d]on’t you think it would be better to meet directly with Robert Kennedy so that he receives your information at first hand?”<sup>5</sup> On this suggestion, Bolshakov went to his superior for permission to pursue a meeting but was quickly forbidden from doing so. However, the temptation of meeting with the president’s closest confidant proved too appealing for Bolshakov, and he decided to meet with Kennedy on May 9<sup>th</sup> regardless of his instructions to the contrary. At 8:30 P.M. that night, Holeman escorted Bolshakov to a rendezvous with Kennedy outside the Justice Department gate. Soon after the two of them began to walk through the National Mall for their first of many meetings.<sup>6</sup>

The relationship between the two men was viewed suspiciously by most of the intelligence community from both countries. Nevertheless, to the Kennedys, it seemed the perfect channel through which to communicate more directly with the Soviet leadership. Their hope in pursuing these private channels was to avoid the common leaks and misinterpretations often found in the traditional diplomatic methods.<sup>7</sup> There was also a lingering mistrust of many of the conventional diplomatic arrangements following the disaster of the Bay of Pigs.

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<sup>5</sup> Fursenko and Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble*, 112.

<sup>6</sup> Fursenko and Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble*, 112-113.

<sup>7</sup> Larry Tye, *Bobby Kennedy: Making of a Liberal Icon* (New York, NY: Random House, 2016), 247.



The meetings between the Soviet spy and Attorney General occurred throughout Washington, the back offices of the Justice Department, and often even at Kennedy's Hickory Hill home where Bolshakov "dazzled the Kennedy children by dancing on his haunches, Cossack-style."<sup>8</sup> Although Khrushchev did not initially fully endorse the relationship, he acknowledged that "the personal rapport between the president's brother and the Soviet military intelligence officer was too great for the Kremlin or the White House to wish to close down the Kennedy-Bolshakov back-channel."<sup>9</sup> According to Kennedy in one of his Oral History interviews commissioned by the Kennedy Library, "most of the major matters dealing with the Soviet Union in the United States were discussed—arrangements were made, really, between Georgi Bolshakov and myself. He was Khrushchev's representative."<sup>10</sup>

This conduit between Robert Kennedy and Georgi Bolshakov became the primary method for President Kennedy and Chairman Khrushchev to communicate. This was necessary because, according to Kennedy, the Soviet leadership began to feel that the Soviet ambassador at the time, Mikhail Menshikov, was "not delivering the true messages reflecting the true point of view,"<sup>11</sup> which in the end gave Khrushchev an

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<sup>8</sup> Tye, *Bobby Kennedy Liberal Icon*, 247.

<sup>9</sup> Fursenko and Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble*, 184.

<sup>10</sup> Robert F. Kennedy Oral History Interview: RFK #1, February 29 and March 1, 1964. John F. Kennedy Oral History Collection. John F. Kennedy Library and Museum, JFKL, 66.

<sup>11</sup> RFK #1, JFKL, 70.



inaccurate understanding of the United States' intentions and decision making. When Anatoly Dobrynin arrived on March 15, 1962, to take over the ambassadorship from Menshikov, he was instructed by Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko to gradually take over Bolshakov's connections. Dobrynin later wrote he felt part of the desire for this change was Gromyko's dislike of any communication channels that did not run through him.<sup>12</sup>

This communication and sense of understanding between himself and President Kennedy gave Khrushchev the ability to exploit the relationship to sneak the missiles into Cuba. This duplicity also contributed to the Kennedy brothers' emotional outrage at the secret movement of weapons by the Soviet Union. To avoid any suspicion by the United States, Khrushchev manipulated this back-channel by using Bolshakov to pass a message to the president through Robert Kennedy stressing a Soviet desire to work towards the Kennedy desired nuclear test ban. This was an attempt to distract the administration from the missile transport.<sup>13</sup> Khrushchev hoped this superficial gesture of goodwill would reassure the Kennedys into a sense of complacency. Throughout September, Khrushchev continued this pattern of sending

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<sup>12</sup> Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence* (New York, NY: 1995), 52-53.

<sup>13</sup> Fursenko and Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble*, 194.

reassuring messages on the nature of weapons in Cuba through Dobrynin and Bolshakov.<sup>14</sup>

### **October 22, 1962**

On October 22<sup>nd</sup>, days after Kennedy learned of the existence of offensive missiles in Cuba, Khrushchev continued his attempted deception by sending a message through Bolshakov saying, “no missile capable of reaching the United States would be placed in Cuba.”<sup>15</sup> Upon learning that these missiles had in fact been placed in Cuba, directly contradicting the assurances by his Soviet friend, Robert Kennedy was reported to say about Bolshakov, “that son of a bitch has got to go.”<sup>16</sup> This comment may have been in response to Bolshakov’s cover being exposed when he was quoted by name in an article on October 20<sup>th</sup>, by trusted Kennedy friend and journalist Charles Bartlett, as a source stating there were no offensive missiles in Cuba. There is no evidence showing that Bolshakov was informed about the exact nature of the weapons in Cuba and likely was unaware until informed by his United States contacts.

During the President’s meeting with his advisors on October 22<sup>nd</sup>, a discussion occurred on the Jupiter missiles in Turkey. The tape-recorded conversation reveals President Kennedy’s desire to remove the

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<sup>14</sup> Fursenko and Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble*, 197.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 68.

<sup>16</sup> Brugioni, *Eyeball to Eyeball*, 178.

Jupiter missiles, saying “this [the Cuba crisis] gives us an excuse to get them out of Turkey and Italy. As long as they’re not connected with it [the current conflict], let’s try to get them out of both places.”<sup>17</sup> These statements, along with private conversations between the Kennedys, likely led to Robert’s attempts the following day to begin working tirelessly to negotiate a diplomatic solution through his Soviet channels involving the private trade of Turkish missiles.

### **October 23, 1962**

In *Thirteen Days*, Bobby describes a meeting he attended with his brother, Ted Sorensen, and Kenny O’Donnell in the oval office. President Kennedy related the current escalating situation in Cuba to a book written by Barbara Tuchman, *The Guns of August*, which described the miscalculations made by the European powers that led to total world war. “He did not want anyone to be able to say that the U.S. had not done all it could to preserve the peace. We were not going to misjudge, or miscalculate, or challenge the other side needlessly, or precipitously push our adversaries into a course of action that was not intended or anticipated.”<sup>18</sup> After the meeting ended the two brothers met, and in the spirit of doing everything possible to maintain the peace, the President asked Bobby to meet with Ambassador Dobrynin to discuss the potential

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<sup>17</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 18.

<sup>18</sup> Robert F. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 49.

repercussions of the Soviet decision to clandestinely place offensive nuclear weapons in Cuba and get a sense of the current Soviet position.<sup>19</sup> The President went on to query his brother for information coming through the Bolshakov backchannel. Robert informs him about his request for Charlie Bartlett to meet with Bolshakov.<sup>20</sup> In fact, Robert Kennedy had asked both Frank Holeman and Bartlett to meet with Bolshakov earlier that day. However, after President Kennedy remarks that Holeman is “not with us in this,”<sup>21</sup> his brother seems to sidestep acknowledging his use of Holeman and shifts the discussion to Bartlett. Holeman, at the request of the attorney general’s office, called Bolshakov to arrange a meeting to feel out the Kremlin on possible diplomatic options to resolving the conflict.<sup>22</sup> Later, based on an interview with Bartlett, he met twice that afternoon with Bolshakov also at Bobby’s request. Kennedy said, “I sent Charlie Bartlett, who was friendly with him [Bolshakov], to see him,”<sup>23</sup> and the two met in Bartlett’s National Press Club office. Bartlett expressed to Bolshakov that the administration did not desire to invade Cuba and was only concerned with eliminating the offensive missiles. The result of this meeting seems to be insignificant, and Kennedy responded by asking Bartlett to meet a

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<sup>19</sup> Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 49.

<sup>20</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 179.

<sup>21</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 178.

<sup>22</sup> Fursenko and Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble*, 249.

<sup>23</sup> Fursenko and Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble*, 251.

second time with the Soviet agent. This time he provided Bartlett with photographs of the missile sites taken from U-2 reconnaissance missions to shock Bolshakov into a more useful response. When queried by Barlett on what he saw, Bolshakov responded, "I have never seen anything like these photographs, and cannot understand what is on them."<sup>24</sup>

Bolshakov conveyed the information he received from these three meetings immediately to his superiors in the GRU. Bolshakov reported, "Robert Kennedy and his circle consider it possible to discuss the following trade: The U.S. would liquidate its missile bases in Turkey and Italy, and the USSR would do the same in Cuba."<sup>25</sup> The notes from Bolshakov conclude with the final remarks supposedly relayed from Robert Kennedy via Holeman: "[t]he conditions of such a trade can be discussed only in a time of quiet and not when there is the threat of war."<sup>26</sup> Bolshakov reported that both individuals provided similar, and in his mind accurate, information that the Kennedys were considering a trade for the Turkish missiles.<sup>27</sup> Still dissatisfied with the lack of response elicited from the Bolshakov channel, Kennedy decided to try another approach.

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<sup>24</sup> Fursenko and Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble*, 251.

<sup>25</sup> Fursenko and Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble*, 249.

<sup>26</sup> Fursenko and Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble*, 250.

<sup>27</sup> Fursenko and Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble*, 250.

At 9:30 P.M. that night Dobrynin and Robert Kennedy met on the third floor of the Russian Embassy. According to Kennedy's account, he related to Dobrynin the fact that the statements stating there were no offensive weapons in Cuba by Dobrynin, Gromyko, and TASS had misled the president. "Dobrynin's only answer was that he told me there were no missiles in Cuba; that this was what Khrushchev had said, and, as far as he knew, there were still no missiles in Cuba."<sup>28</sup> An interesting exchange between Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko and Dobrynin at the Moscow Conference on the Cuban Missile Crisis confirms Dobrynin's assertion that he was unaware of the placement of missiles in Cuba:

**Dobrynin:** sometimes when an ambassador is abroad, he is not told everything.

**Gromyko:** What, Anatoly Fyodorovich [Dobrynin]? Do you mean that I did not tell you, the ambassador, about the nuclear missiles in Cuba?

**Dobrynin:** No, you did not tell me.

**Gromyko:** That means it must have been a very big secret!

Gromyko goes on, rather condescendingly, saying, "[s]o do not be offended, Anatoly Fyodorovich, that you were not in the know about everything."<sup>29</sup> Dean Rusk, who gave Dobrynin a copy of the President's television speech detailing the evidence of missiles in Cuba, describes the diplomat's reaction as, "I saw him age ten years right in front of my eyes...I'm inclined to think that Dobrynin was not cut in on the details of

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<sup>28</sup> Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 50-51.

<sup>29</sup> Allyn, Blight, and Welch, *Back to the Brink*, 145-146.

the missiles in Cuba, although Gromyko was.”<sup>30</sup> Oddly, there is no reference to a missile trade during this final meeting on the 23<sup>rd</sup> between Kennedy and Dobrynin in any of the accounts detailing the meeting. This omission seems inconsistent, especially based on the three meetings earlier in the day with Bolshakov that discussed the possibility of a trade.

Strangely, the GRU station that received the reports from Bolshakov chose not to transmit the information regarding the Jupiter missiles to Moscow immediately. This failure to act broke from the standard protocol up to that point of passing all information on meetings with Robert Kennedy to Moscow. This change likely stemmed from Bolshakov’s declining position in the eyes of Moscow. Furthermore, as Dobrynin relates, “he [Bolshakov] knew little of the diplomatic side of our relations with the Kennedy administration and nothing of the details of some negotiations and our positions in them...he could not converse with Robert Kennedy and Salinger on an adequate level.”<sup>31</sup> Bobby alludes to this change in the status of his friend when he relays to the president that Dobrynin told him, “don’t pay attention to Georgi [Bolshakov].”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> James G. Blight and David A. Welch, *On the Brink: Americans and Soviets Reexamine the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1989), 185-186.

<sup>31</sup> Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, 53.

<sup>32</sup> Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Three*, 179.

Even Dobrynin, in 1989 at the Moscow Conference, seemed unaware of the information received by Bolshakov on the 23<sup>rd</sup> regarding a missile trade. Dobrynin said, “[t]he question about the bases, until the 27<sup>th</sup> [Dobrynin likely means the 26<sup>th</sup> when he discusses the missiles with Robert Kennedy referenced later], did not arise. I mean the bases in Turkey.”<sup>33</sup>

Another possible origin for the trade of missiles emerged at the Moscow Conference. Aleksandr Alekseev, the Soviet ambassador to Cuba during the crisis, gave his opinion “that Khrushchev did not have thoughts of an exchange for Turkish missiles. Khrushchev was thinking nothing of the sort. It got started in your press—Lippmann wrote about it.”<sup>34</sup> Walter Lippmann, noted Kennedy insider and journalist for the *Washington Post*, had written two articles on October 23<sup>rd</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> detailing his thoughts on the crisis. Lippmann argues that the link many in the press were making between Cuba and Berlin was misleading. These were very different cases since the American base in Berlin did not contain missiles or offensive capabilities. Instead, “[t]he only place that is truly comparable with Cuba is Turkey. This is the only place where there are strategic weapons right on the frontier of the Soviet Union.” He went on to say that “[t]he two bases could be dismantled

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<sup>33</sup> Allyn, Blight, and Welch, *Back to the Brink*, 80.

<sup>34</sup> Allyn, Blight, and Welch, *Back to the Brink*, 13.



without altering the world balance of power.”<sup>35</sup> Alekseev theorizes that as the crisis escalated “perhaps Khrushchev just grabbed at this lifesaver. So as not simply to depart Cuba, but to get something at least. But I think that the issue of Turkey never figured in our negotiations.”<sup>36</sup>

Further reinforcing the idea that the Turkish missile exchange came into the Soviet decision calculus much later in the conflict were statements by Khrushchev’s son Sergei Khrushchev at the Moscow Conference. “On one hand, Khrushchev thought that war would not begin and consequently these missiles [in Turkey] did not represent a threat greater than any others. On the other hand, he believed that these missiles were obsolete and that all the same the president would take them out sooner or later.”<sup>37</sup>

### **October 26, 1962**

During the Moscow Conference, Dobrynin describes a meeting he had during the evening of October 26<sup>th</sup> with Robert Kennedy. The desk diary kept for Robert Kennedy's calendar appointments does not document this meeting, but there are no conflicting events scheduled that day after a 5:45 P.M. “Mtg. at State Dept.”<sup>38</sup> Only two of the

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<sup>35</sup> Walter Lippman, “Today and Tomorrow: Blockade Proclaimed,” *Washington Post*, 25 October 1962, A25.

<sup>36</sup> Allyn, Blight, and Welch, *Back to the Brink*, 13-14.

<sup>37</sup> Allyn, Blight, and Welch, *Back to the Brink*, 39-40.

<sup>38</sup> Desk Diaries 1961-1964. Papers of Robert F. Kennedy. Attorney General Papers. Series 05. Attorney General’s Confidential File, Box 146, Folder: “1962” John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

meetings between the two were actually documented in this record. The majority of the discussion centered around an agreement that the United States would not invade Cuba and that the Soviet Union would withdraw missiles placed there. In response to Kennedy's assertions that these weapons threatened the security of the United States, Dobrynin says he asked why these were different from the missiles in Turkey? Kennedy responded "you are interested in the missiles in Turkey? One minute, I will go and talk to the president."<sup>39</sup> Upon returning from his conversation, Kennedy said: "the president said that we are ready to consider the question about Turkey—to examine favorably the question of Turkey."<sup>40</sup> Bobby was already primed for this subject, evidenced by his attempts on the 23<sup>rd</sup> to address this exact question and likely was unaware that the information previously passed to Bolshakov was not also given to Dobrynin. Dobrynin relayed the information on this meeting to Moscow and the next day Khrushchev released the infamous public letter referencing a trade of missiles in Turkey.

### **October 27, 1962**

Late on the night of the 27<sup>th</sup> Dobrynin says he was invited by Bobby to meet at the Justice Department. According to *Thirteen Days*, Bobby telephoned Dobrynin about 7:15 requesting to meet and did so

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<sup>39</sup> Allyn, Blight, and Welch, *Back to the Brink*, 143.

<sup>40</sup> Allyn, Blight, and Welch, *Back to the Brink*, 143.

half an hour later in Kennedy's office.<sup>41</sup> The Attorney General expressed his feeling that the crisis was rapidly worsening, especially with the recent news of the shoot down of the U.S. U-2 reconnaissance aircraft. This action created increasing pressure on the president to strike Cuba.<sup>42</sup> Bobby explained that the president believed that Khrushchev's first letter, lacking any mention of a missile trade, provided a reasonable basis upon which to resolve the crisis. The most important thing to the United States was that all construction was stopped on the missile sites. In response, the United States would end the quarantine and guarantee they would not invade Cuba. Following this explanation, Dobrynin, in his book, says he questioned the lack of inclusion of the Turkish missile agreement.<sup>43</sup> Kennedy describes his response as "there could be no quid pro quo or any arrangement made under this kind of threat or pressure, and that in the last analysis this was a decision that would have to be made by NATO."<sup>44</sup> The Attorney General uses the same phrase in his memorandum to Secretary Rusk. In his description, he again uses "quid pro quo"<sup>45</sup> underlined for emphasis to explain his response to Dobrynin's query on the removal of missiles in Turkey. However, he goes on to say

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<sup>41</sup> Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 81.

<sup>42</sup> Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, 87.

<sup>43</sup> Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, 88.

<sup>44</sup> Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 83.

<sup>45</sup> Memorandum for the Secretary of State from the Attorney General, October 30, 1962. Papers of Robert F. Kennedy. Attorney General Papers. Series 09. Attorney General's Confidential File, Box 218, Folder: "Cuba: Cuban Crisis, 1962: State Department, (2 of 3 folders)" JFKL.

that his brother was anxious to remove these missiles from both Turkey and Italy and that perhaps these matters could be addressed following the resolution of the present crisis.<sup>46</sup>

According to the Soviet Ambassador's account of the meeting, Kennedy replied that the president was willing to remove the missiles but because of the delicate nature of the NATO alliance could not agree to a public deal.<sup>47</sup> Conversely, Dobrynin describes a much more specific agreement between the two regarding the Turkish missiles. According to the ambassador, Kennedy said, "I believe, that it will probably take four to five months for the U.S. to withdraw its missiles from Turkey. This is the minimum time the administration will require in view of rules of procedure within NATO. The discussion of the whole Turkish aspect of the problem can be continued through you and myself. Right now, however, there is nothing the president could say publicly about Turkey in this context."<sup>48</sup> Kennedy explicitly stressed the confidential nature of the agreement on the missile exchange and concluded by saying that the president asked that Khrushchev gives "an explicit, substantive reply by the next day –Sunday—through our private channel rather than become involved in a complex debate that could merely cause delay."<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 83.

<sup>47</sup> Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, 88.

<sup>48</sup> Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, 88.

<sup>49</sup> Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, 88.

The origin of this discrepancy between accounts on the missile agreement was finally explained during the Moscow Conference on the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1989. During the discussion between many of the key figures of the crisis, Ted Sorensen made a previously unknown revelation. Sorensen confessed, "I was the editor of Robert Kennedy's book. It was, in fact, a diary of those thirteen days. And his diary was very explicit that this was part of the deal; but at that time it was still a secret even on the American side, except for the six of us who had been present at that meeting. So I took it upon myself to edit that out of his diaries, and that is why the Ambassador is somewhat justified in saying that the diaries are not as explicit as his conversation."<sup>50</sup> This narrative matches the politically-based desire of the administration and the president to avoid any documented evidence of a trade.

The recorded descriptions of the tone and behavior of Kennedy during this crucial meeting vary. In Chairman Khrushchev's first memoir *Khrushchev Remembers* he describes the Attorney General as "look[ing] exhausted. One could see from his eyes that he had not slept for days. He himself said that he had not been home for six days and nights."<sup>51</sup> However, the released report from Dobrynin, which provided the basis for this account, contains a less unflattering description. The

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<sup>50</sup> Allyn, Blight, and Welch, *Back to the Brink*, 92-93.

<sup>51</sup> Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, trans. Strobe Talbott (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1970), 497.

Soviet Ambassador says "that during our meeting R. Kennedy was very upset; in any case, I've never seen him like this before. True, about twice he tried to return to the topic of 'deception,' but he did so in passing and without any edge to it. He didn't even try to get into fights on various subjects, as he usually does, and only persistently returned to one topic: time is of the essence and we shouldn't miss the chance."<sup>52</sup> While this description describes an individual that was likely tired, Khrushchev appears to take liberty with his account to make Kennedy appear weak when compared to his Soviet counterpart.

Many of the books and analyses of the crisis assume that this meeting resulted in Robert issuing Dobrynin an ultimatum. However, Dobrynin's account of the meeting says "Robert Kennedy said his brother hoped that the head of the Soviet government would not misunderstand him and think the United States was issuing an ultimatum. It was simply that time was of the essence."<sup>53</sup> The account in *Thirteen Days* emphasizes the time factor saying, "[t]ime was running out. We had only a few more hours—we needed an answer immediately from the Soviet Union. I said we must have it the next day."<sup>54</sup> Dobrynin's description is confirmed in his telegram sent to Khrushchev on October 27<sup>th</sup>. He states, "[t]he request for a reply tomorrow, stressed R. Kennedy, is just

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<sup>52</sup> Lebow and Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War*, 526.

<sup>53</sup> Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, 88.

<sup>54</sup> Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 83.

that—a request, and not an ultimatum. The president hopes that the head of the Soviet government will understand him correctly.”<sup>55</sup> On October 30<sup>th</sup>, Robert Kennedy sent a memorandum describing the meeting to Secretary Dean Rusk, where he again emphasizes that “[t]his was not an ultimatum.”<sup>56</sup> Despite these consistent accounts, Khrushchev's memoirs say "President Kennedy issued an ultimatum, demanding that we remove our missiles and bombers from Cuba.”<sup>57</sup> Khrushchev's account was likely an attempt to write history in the most favorable light, especially since at the time, 1970, the official documents from both the United States and the Soviet Union had yet to be released.

#### **October 28, 1962**

Different accounts dispute the timing of this message. According to Kennedy's account, he met at 11:00 A.M. on Sunday with Dobrynin where he learned that Khrushchev would agree to dismantle and remove the missiles from Cuba, essentially agreeing to all aspects of the United States' proposal.<sup>58</sup> According to Dobrynin, this exchange occurred later in the day at 4 P.M. At this time Dobrynin says he received an urgent cable from Gromyko. It read, "[g]et in touch with Robert Kennedy at once

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<sup>55</sup> Lebow and Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War*, 526.

<sup>56</sup> Memorandum for the Secretary of State from the Attorney General, October 30, 1962. Papers of Robert F. Kennedy. Attorney General Papers. Series 09. Attorney General's Confidential File, Box 218, Folder: "Cuba: Cuban Crisis, 1962: State Department, (2 of 3 folders)" JFKL.

<sup>57</sup> Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, 497.

<sup>58</sup> Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 84.

and tell him that you have conveyed the contents of your conversation with him to N. S. Khrushchev. Khrushchev herewith gives the following urgent reply: 'The suggestions made by Robert Kennedy on the president's instructions are appreciated in Moscow. The president's message of October 27 will be answered on the radio today, and the answer will be highly positive.' The principal point that worries the president, namely, the issue of dismantling missile bases in Cuba under international control, raises no objections and will receive ample coverage in Khrushchev's address."<sup>59</sup> However, this apparent agreement did not end the crisis.

#### **October 29, 1962**

In a memorandum written by the Attorney General to Rusk, he described his meeting with Dobrynin on October 29<sup>th</sup>. Kennedy stated that he received a phone call at 11:00 A.M. from Dobrynin requesting to meet which, according to the Attorney General's desk diaries, they did at 7:45 P.M. in the Attorney General's office.<sup>60</sup> The description in the memorandum of the meeting that night is brief and only mentions that Dobrynin gave him an unsigned letter from Khrushchev to the President. This letter, Kennedy felt, "did not properly set forth my conversation of the previous Saturday night with Ambassador Dobrynin. However, I said

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<sup>59</sup> Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, 89.

<sup>60</sup> Desk Diaries 1961-1964, Box 146, Folder: "1962," JFKL.



nothing at the time and left.”<sup>61</sup> In Dobrynin's memoir, he describes passing a confidential message from Chairman Khrushchev to President Kennedy accepting the terms set forth by the United States.<sup>62</sup> However, the message acknowledged the Turkish missiles although it also agreed to avoid public discussion of the matter and promised only to discuss the subject through the confidential back-channel between the Attorney General and Soviet ambassador.<sup>63</sup> The exact contents of the letter have never been revealed and do not seem to exist in the records of the United States or the Soviet Union. Following this meeting, Kennedy met with Secretary Rusk and Ambassador Thompson to discuss the contents of the message. Robert Kennedy's handwritten notes written immediately after meeting with the ambassador provide the best insight into the substance of the letter from the United States' perspective. These notes and his memorandum to Rusk show this was likely a Soviet attempt to gain a written record of the agreed upon deal regarding the Jupiter missiles. The Attorney General's notes written on yellow lined sheets read:

Read letter—studied it over night  
No quid pro quo as I told you  
This letter makes it appear that there was  
You asked me about missile bases in Turkey

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<sup>61</sup> Memorandum for the Secretary of State from the Attorney General, October 30, 1962. Papers of Robert F. Kennedy. Attorney General Papers. Series 09. Attorney General's Confidential File, Box 218, Folder: "Cuba: Cuban Crisis, 1962: State Department, (2 of 3 folders)" JFKL.

<sup>62</sup> Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, 90.

<sup>63</sup> Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, 90.

I told you we would be out of there—4-5 months  
That still holds. *Unclear*—you understood that  
No reason for a letter.  
If letters of this type are needed—go to State Dept  
You have my word on this & that is sufficient  
Take back your letter—Reconsider it & if you feel it is  
necessary to write letters then we will also write one  
which you cannot enjoy  
Also if you should publish any document indicating a  
deal then it is off & also if done afterwards will further  
affect the *unclear* relationship<sup>64</sup>

Dobrynin provided additional information about the contents of the  
confidential memorandum during the Moscow Conference in 1989. In  
discussing the topics laid out in the letter, he says that not only were the  
Jupiter missiles included but also that, “[w]e raised the question of  
Guantanamo...this question did not meet with understanding from the  
American side. But the question that the matter had been raised is a  
fact.”<sup>65</sup> Later during the conference Dobrynin provided additional  
information on the contents, saying the letter:

summed up the official oral communication and  
provided a formula for the agreement which existed—  
namely that the U.S. was under obligation not to  
invade Cuba and we were under obligation to remove  
our weapons which they called "offensive," and that we  
regarded the question of the Jupiters as an integral  
part of that agreement, though we are ready not to  
make it public.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Robert Kennedy Handwritten Notes, Yellow lined paper. Papers of Robert F. Kennedy. Attorney General Papers. Series 09. Attorney General's Confidential File, Box 218, Folder: "Cuba: Cuban Crisis, 1962: State Department, (2 of 3 folders)" JFKL.

<sup>65</sup> Allyn, Blight, and Welch, *Back to the Brink*, 142.

<sup>66</sup> Allyn, Blight, and Welch, *Back to the Brink*, 144.

Secretary Rusk, in his memoir, *As I Saw It*, said the letter “impl[ie]d that we had made an official agreement. That memo was returned to Dobrynin as inappropriate in the circumstances.”<sup>67</sup>

### **October 30, 1962**

After studying the letter overnight, Robert Kennedy met with Dobrynin the next day.<sup>68</sup> Kennedy’s memorandum to Rusk and his desk diary set the time for the October 30<sup>th</sup> meeting as 2:15 P.M. in his Department of Justice office.<sup>69</sup> Kennedy says he communicated his impression that the Khrushchev letter was misleading and would necessitate a response from President Kennedy clarifying the terms of agreement. In the memorandum, he describes his emphasis to Dobrynin that if the missiles were not removed from Cuba, “drastic action was going to be necessary by the United States. I also repeated what I had said earlier that there never could be any kind of deal or arrangement as far as the Turkish missile bases were concerned.”<sup>70</sup> Although, according to Dobrynin’s account, at this point Robert Kennedy again informed him

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<sup>67</sup> Dean Rusk, *As I Saw It* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990), 240.

<sup>68</sup> Memorandum for the Secretary of State from the Attorney General, October 30, 1962. Papers of Robert F. Kennedy. Attorney General Papers. Series 09. Attorney General’s Confidential File, Box 218, Folder: “Cuba: Cuban Crisis, 1962: State Department, (2 of 3 folders)” JFKL.

<sup>69</sup> Desk Diaries 1961-1964, Box 146, Folder: “1962,” JFKL.

<sup>70</sup> Memorandum for the Secretary of State from the Attorney General, October 30, 1962. Papers of Robert F. Kennedy. Attorney General Papers. Series 09. Attorney General’s Confidential File, Box 218, Folder: “Cuba: Cuban Crisis, 1962: State Department, (2 of 3 folders)” JFKL.

that the president had agreed to close the American missile bases in Turkey but stressed that there would be no formal agreement because of the sensitivity of the withdrawal.<sup>71</sup>

The dealings with Dobrynin and especially the Turkish missile trade show Robert Kennedy acting with the President's blessing but also making independent decisions with an understanding of what his brother ultimately wanted. The exact manner in which he conducted parts of these negotiations and the channels he used were likely not approved or endorsed, but because of the intense trust between the two Kennedys he was provided the latitude to negotiate as he saw fit. By rejecting any written agreement on the Turkish missiles, Robert Kennedy was controlling the narrative for his brother. By keeping the deal a secret Bobby protected his brother from political attacks or negative impacts on the NATO alliance. At the end of Bobby's handwritten notes from the meeting with Dobrynin the night before, there are two lines that illustrate the manner in which Kennedy protected his brother while understanding what was needed on his part.

Pres rejected Turkish base deal—Pres accept later

Know what Pres means<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, 90.

<sup>72</sup> Robert Kennedy Handwritten Notes, Yellow lined paper. Papers of Robert F. Kennedy. Attorney General Papers. Series 09. Attorney General's Confidential File, Box 218, Folder: "Cuba: Cuban Crisis, 1962: State Department, (2 of 3 folders)" JFKL.

These notes illustrate an understanding by Bobby Kennedy that, officially, the President had to reject any trade of missiles. However, unofficially the President was willing to accept a trade that would be executed sometime in the future. Robert understood what his brother wanted, and he knew how to execute those wishes. Furthermore, he held the confidence to understand he was acting with his brother's tacit sanction.

Dobrynin captured the significance of his back-channel communication with Kennedy during the Moscow Conference saying, "[w]ith regard to the question connected to Robert Kennedy. I should say that in my view the existence of the confidential channel did play a positive role in the course of the crisis. After all, who if not the brother of the president would know what the president was thinking. Consequently, those statements I sent to Moscow were received as quite authoritative."<sup>73</sup> The Soviet Union understood that the relationship between John and Robert Kennedy went far beyond a typical advisor role. Information and agreements from Robert Kennedy were perceived to be sanctioned by the President, and the Soviet leadership treated them as such. Although the channel was abused by Khrushchev when he initially moved the missiles into Cuba, both sides were able to

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<sup>73</sup> Allyn, Blight, and Welch, *Back to the Brink*, 79.

communicate more clearly and quickly than would have been possible through traditional means.

### **Promise Kept**

On April 25, 1963 Robert McNamara sent the President a handwritten note that said, “The last Jupiter missiles in Turkey came down yesterday. The last Jupiter warhead will be flown out of Turkey on Saturday.”<sup>74</sup> Although the secret deal was completed, the knowledge of the agreement remained one of the best-kept secrets for decades. If the agreement had become known at the time, the ramifications would have been extremely consequential to both the Kennedy administration and the United States. In fact, the secret was so well kept that Dean Rusk, in his memoir *As I Saw It*, remarks that “Neither [President] Kennedy nor I, nor anyone on the ExComm with the exception of Adlai Stevenson and John J. McCloy, thought a missile trade with the Soviets wise because it smacked of blackmail and could set a dangerous precedent.”<sup>75</sup> Most importantly it would have undermined the still young NATO alliance and created a sense in the international community of the United States “selling out” its Allies to serve its own interests. Furthermore, the reaction in Congress, the Joint Chiefs, and voters, would have cancelled

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<sup>74</sup> Handwritten note from Robert McNamara to President Kennedy. Papers of John F. Kennedy. Presidential Papers. President’s Office Files. Series 07. Departments and Agencies, Box 77, Folder: “Defense, 1963: January-June.” JFKL.

<sup>75</sup> Rusk, *As I Saw It*, 240.

out much of the gains in approval Kennedy received following the resolution of the crisis. As it happened, the end of the crisis was viewed by most observers as a victory for the Kennedy administration and one of the greatest accomplishments of his presidency. By allowing the crisis to resolve without a public declaration acknowledging the missile trade from President Kennedy, Khrushchev was seen as the loser in the conflict.<sup>76</sup> The United States succeeded in reestablishing the status quo in Cuba while removing missiles from Turkey that were already outdated and eventually slated for replacement by the more capable Polaris submarine missiles.

During testimony to the House of Representatives Committee on Appropriations on February 7, 1963 McNamara addressed questions regarding a missile trade with the Soviet Union. Congressman Ostertag references speculation:

whether or not an agreement or a deal was entered into with the Soviet Union or Mr. Khrushchev that for the removal of offensive weapons in Cuba we would in return make certain concessions. One of the speculations applies to the alleged withdrawal of our missile bases from Turkey. Since that time I believe it has been the intent or the declared intent of the United States to withdraw our missiles from Turkey. The circumstances of the events sort of point a finger, Mr. Secretary. Could you clear that up?<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, 91.

<sup>77</sup> House, *Department of Defense Appropriations for 1964: Hearings before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations*, 88<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1963, 57.



McNamara responds:

Yes, I would be happy to. I can say without any qualifications whatsoever there was absolutely no deal, as it might be called, between the Soviet Union and the United States regarding the removal of the JUPITER weapons from either Italy or Turkey.

The question was raised by Mr. Khrushchev during the negotiations relating to the withdrawal of the offensive weapons from Cuba. The President absolutely refused to discuss it at that time, and no discussion took place, and certainly there was no agreement to withdraw weapons from any allied nation in association with a response to the agreement of the Soviets to withdraw offensive weapons in Cuba.<sup>78</sup>

The use of Robert Kennedy, the most trusted person in the mind of President Kennedy, and the strict avoidance of documenting the agreement between the two nations allowed McNamara to continue the traditional narrative that no deal was in place, even during sworn Congressional testimony. This consistent messaging was reinforced by all members of Kennedy's staff, both those that were aware of the deal and those that were not. Some, as demonstrated by the previously mentioned Sorensen confession, went so far as to remove references to the deal from Robert Kennedy's manuscript. This text, published as *Thirteen Days*, was the unquestioned source for insight into the inner workings of the crisis until new sources, such as declassified tape recordings and documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis, were made available starting in 1983 and continuing through the late 1990s. Even

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<sup>78</sup> House, *Appropriations*, 57.



Khrushchev avoids any mention of the agreed upon exchange of missiles in his memoir, merely saying the agreement to remove their missiles and bombers was “on the condition that the President give us his assurance that there would be no invasion of Cuba by the forces of the United States or anybody else.”<sup>79</sup>

Although an understanding between the United States and the Soviet Union was reached through the Robert Kennedy-Anatoly Dobrynin channel, there still remained multiple obstacles to a resolution, namely Fidel Castro. These impediments would take until late November to overcome and require many sleepless and stressful nights for those working to bring about a peaceful end to the crisis.

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<sup>79</sup> Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, 498.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Resolution to the Crisis**

*Thank God for Bobby.*

President John Kennedy

Many popular accounts refer to the thirteen days of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Even Bobby Kennedy's memoir and a large-budget Hollywood movie were titled *Thirteen Days*. In fact, it would take over three weeks after the famous thirteen days to truly resolve the crisis. Until the 28<sup>th</sup> of October, the thirteenth day of the crisis, the negotiations had largely been only between the Soviet Union and the United States. However, the following three weeks were largely driven by Fidel Castro and his anger over Khrushchev's handling of the negotiations with the United States.

#### **The Final Obstacles**

Although a tentative agreement was brokered through the Robert Kennedy-Anatoly Dobrynin channel, the crisis was far from over. The focus for the United States and EXCOMM now shifted to the verification process for the removal of the missiles and IL-28 bombers from Cuba. These remaining hurdles created three tense weeks during which the final outcome remained uncertain.

In a 28 October letter from U Thant to President Kennedy, the UN Secretary General laid out the previously agreed upon terms and informed the president that the UN would undertake the verification of

the removal of offensive weapons from Cuba. Thant reiterated the expectation that, in exchange for the UN verification, the United States would agree "(a) to remove promptly the quarantine measures now in effect and (b) to give assurances against an invasion of Cuba."<sup>1</sup> The following day in a meeting with his military advisors, President Kennedy expressed his pessimistic assessment of the situation saying, "we just have to assume that we're going to be back with Cuba in two or three months."<sup>2</sup> Cuban sovereignty, and Fidel Castro's intransigence, further complicated the difficult question of verifying Soviet compliance in removing the weapons.

Castro, as the leader of Cuba, was not consulted or informed about Khrushchev's decision to remove the missiles from Cuba. In fact, Castro learned the news on the 28<sup>th</sup> of October from a phone call from Carlos Franqui, the editor of the Cuban newspaper *Revolución*. When Franqui saw the Associated Press teletype headline "Khrushchev orders the withdrawal of missiles from Cuba," he immediately called Castro and asked, "Fidel, what should we do about this news?" To which Castro responded "What news?" followed by a long silence in which the editor

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<sup>1</sup> Letter From Secretary General U Thant to President Kennedy, October 28, 1962. Papers of John F. Kennedy. Presidential Papers. National Security Files. Series 01. Countries, Box 47, Folder: "Cuba: Subjects: Composite of exchange correspondence between President Kennedy, Khrushchev, U Thant, and Castro, through 28 October 1962." JFKL.

<sup>2</sup> David Coleman, ed., *The Presidential Recordings: John F. Kennedy, The Winds of Change, Volume Four* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016), 34.

wondered if the line had gone dead. After Franqui read him the headline Fidel responded, "Son of a bitch! Bastard! Asshole!"<sup>3</sup> He "was so furious, that he kicked at the wall of the room they [he and Che Guevara] were in and broke a mirror."<sup>4</sup> To Castro, this was a betrayal by his Soviet ally, and later reflecting on the situation he perceived that Cuba's "relations with Russia started on the downgrade after that for some years."<sup>5</sup> Conversely, Khrushchev viewed the deal as "a great victory for us, though, that we had been able to extract from Kennedy a promise that neither America nor her allies would invade Cuba. But Castro didn't see it that way. He was angry."<sup>6</sup> In an attempt to reassure Castro, Khrushchev wrote him a letter in which he expressed that "The main point about the Caribbean crisis is that it has guaranteed the existence of a Socialist Cuba."<sup>7</sup> Regardless of the deal reached between the Soviets and Americans, Cuba had, according to Dean Rusk, "not yet made any commitment about the existence of a U.N. body on the island. They will welcome U. Thant tomorrow to talk about it, but they don't want to

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<sup>3</sup> Carlos Franqui, *Family Portrait with Fidel* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1985), 194.

<sup>4</sup> Herbert L. Matthews, *Revolution in Cuba: An Essay in Understanding* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975), 213.

<sup>5</sup> Matthews, *Revolution in Cuba*, 213.

<sup>6</sup> Nikita Khrushchev, "Khrushchev Remembers: Part IV: Playing for High Stakes," *Life* 69, no. 25 (18 December 1970): 52.

<sup>7</sup> Khrushchev, "Khrushchev Remembers: Part IV," 52.

negotiate.”<sup>8</sup> On the 30<sup>th</sup> of October U Thant flew south to Cuba to begin negotiations with Castro on a plan to remove the Soviet missiles.

The question of how to verify the removal of all the offensive weapons continued to be debated among EXCOMM. Without a United States presence on the ground to observe the dismantling of the offensive weapons, another method was necessary. The best alternative appeared to be continued U-2 reconnaissance flights. However, this tactic entailed certain risks. A sophisticated SA-2 system now blanketed the whole of Cuba and created a threat to any attempts to fly over the island.<sup>9</sup> This capability and risk were demonstrated dramatically when Rudolf Anderson’s U-2 was shot down on a surveillance mission on October 27<sup>th</sup>.

As U Thant began negotiations with Castro in Cuba, EXCOMM continued to meet, but due to a largely stagnant situation, little was accomplished. On the 31<sup>st</sup> of October, Gromyko reached out to Castro through the Soviet Ambassador to Cuba, A.I. Alekseev, with directions to agree to U Thant’s request to personally observe and verify the dismantlement of the missile sites. The Soviet leadership was well aware of the international spotlight on the tense situation in Cuba and were now making every effort to bolster their image. Gromyko wrote, "It is

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<sup>8</sup> Coleman, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Four*, 52.

<sup>9</sup> David G. Coleman, *The Fourteenth Day: JFK and the Aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012), 49.

advantageous for us, especially taking into account that U Thant has promised to make a statement immediately on his return to the U.S.A., that the Soviet Union had fulfilled its commitments."<sup>10</sup>

At approximately 8:30 P.M. on October 31<sup>st</sup>, U Thant arrived back in New York from Cuba. Although Thant publicly characterized his negotiations with Castro as "fruitful", the reality was much different.<sup>11</sup> Thant met later that night with an American delegation including Stevenson, McCloy, and Charles Yost. Thant relayed to the group assembled that his initial meeting with Castro was dominated by a two-and-a-half-hour long tirade in which the leader expressed his anger at not being informed and his intention to "do everything in his power to prevent any inspection on Cuban territory."<sup>12</sup> According to Franqui, Castro understood that his power was reliant on the Soviet structure and that any complete break with them would hurt his grip on Cuba. However, he could not allow an inspection on the island by any agency "because that would have finished him off."<sup>13</sup> Castro felt he had to stay firm in the stance of not allowing any verifications on Cuban soil.

As a result of Castro's refusal to allow inspections of the missile sites to occur in Cuba, the United States was faced with a decision on

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<sup>10</sup> "Cable from Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko to USSR Ambassador to Cuba A.I. Alekseev, 31 October 1962," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, issue 8-9 (Winter 1996/1997): 305-306.

<sup>11</sup> Coleman, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Four*, 181.

<sup>12</sup> Coleman, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Four*, 182.

<sup>13</sup> Franqui, *Family Portrait with Fidel*, 200.

how to verify Soviet fulfillment of the agreement. Two methods of aerial surveillance were available, high-level U-2 flights or low-level Air Force RF-101 and Navy F-8U flights. The risks were higher for the low-level operations but the greater fidelity and detail captured were substantial.<sup>14</sup> Further complicating the decision was the news provided by McNamara during the evening EXCOMM meeting on the 29<sup>th</sup>. According to McNamara one of the RF-101s sent to capture photographs of the IL-28 airfield, “appears to have been fired on. The pilot reported about 20 bursts of antiaircraft fire on the side and behind the aircraft. None of the other pilots reported fire.”<sup>15</sup> In response, President Kennedy decided to make a private complaint to the U.N. to avoid hurting the resolution of the crisis and postpone additional reconnaissance flights for at least two days until after Thant’s visit.<sup>16</sup> During the November 1<sup>st</sup> EXCOMM meeting, after Thant’s return, the President authorized the resumption of reconnaissance flights. President Kennedy approved low-level sorties conducted by six aircraft to photograph the IL-28 airfield and several of the MRBM sites. Furthermore, it was decided that “if a U.S. plane is shot down, no military reprisal will be taken today...The President directed that if one of our planes was hit, we would not announce this fact. We would not announce our intention to make low-level flights, but

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<sup>14</sup> Coleman, *The Fourteenth Day*, 51.

<sup>15</sup> Coleman, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Four*, 57.

<sup>16</sup> Coleman, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Four*, 58.

we would announce the return of our planes after they are back.”<sup>17</sup> With no other options to verify the removal and dismantlement of the missiles, the only viable option for the United States was continued aerial reconnaissance.

In sharp contrast to Castro's rhetoric, the U.N. group observed that the Soviet officials in Cuba were extremely forthcoming and went to great lengths to act on Khrushchev's promise to dismantle and remove the missiles. Alekseev and the military commander of Soviet missile forces in Cuba, Major General Igor Statsenko, both stated that efforts to dismantle the bases commenced within a few hours of receiving the order on October 28<sup>th</sup>. The Soviets set the expectation that by November 2<sup>nd</sup> they would remove the missiles and major equipment and have the sites bulldozed. Thant also related his impression, although never explicitly addressed, that the Soviets intended to remove their IL-28 bombers as well.<sup>18</sup> On November 1<sup>st</sup>, Gromyko sent a telegram to the Soviet Ambassador in Havana with a more detailed timeline for the missile removal. Gromyko wrote:

The date for the removal of the dismantled special materials from Cuba has been set for 7 or 8 November, but not later than 10 November. This has become

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<sup>17</sup> “Summary Record of the 16<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council, Washington, November 1, 1962, 10 a.m.,” *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XI, Cuban Missile Crisis and Aftermath*, eds. Edward C. Keefer, Charles S. Sampson, Louis J. Smith, and David S. Patterson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1996), Document 130.

<sup>18</sup> Coleman, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Four*, 182-183.



possible as a result of the fact that the necessity of observing strict secrecy in the transfer of the special materials has fallen away. For the removal of these materials it is now possible and advisable to use our usual ships located in Cuban ports or arriving there in the coming days, and there is no need to hide such materials in the ship holds.<sup>19</sup>

Encouraging evidence from surveillance flights on November 1<sup>st</sup> analyzed by the NPIC showed the Soviets were in fact dismantling and bulldozing the missile sites. Less reassuring was evidence that the assembly of IL-28 bombers appeared to continue and accelerate at the airfields.<sup>20</sup>

At the November 3<sup>rd</sup> EXCOMM meeting, John McCone presented an analysis showing continued progress with the assembly of IL-28s at the San Julian airfield. On October 15<sup>th</sup>, there were only 21 crates containing aircraft parts. By November 2<sup>nd</sup>, there were two fully operational bombers, five nearly complete, and two fuselages ready for assembly.<sup>21</sup> Aside from the IL-28 bombers, the intelligence received indicated the Soviets were fulfilling their side of the agreement. However, even this was met by widespread fear that the progress could all be a

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<sup>19</sup> "Telegram from USSR Foreign Minister A. Gromyko to Soviet Ambassador in Havana with a copy sent to Kuznetsov in New York," November 01, 1962, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, AVP RF; copy obtained by NHK, provided to CWIHP, and on file at National Security Archive, Washington, D.C.; translation by John Henriksen <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/112649>

<sup>20</sup> Memorandum, CIA The Crisis: USSR/Cuba, 2 November 1962. Papers of John F. Kennedy. Presidential Papers. National Security Files. Series 01. Countries, Box 46, Folder: "Cuba: Subjects, CIA Memoranda, 11/1/62-11/4/62." JFKL.

<sup>21</sup> Coleman, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Four*, 243.

clever ruse and the Soviets were, in fact, hiding the weapons in Cuba's "very large number of [caves]...known to be used for the storage of military hardware."<sup>22</sup>

To clarify the issue of the IL-28s, John McCloy had lunch with Soviet First Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs, Vasily Kuznetsov, on November 4<sup>th</sup>, to discuss the issue. According to a telegram summarizing the meeting, McCloy: "expressed great concern over the evidence of the assembly of the IL-28's. The buildup of these planes was in sharp contrast to the dismantling of the sites and largely nullified the good impression we were getting from the rapidity with which the missile sites were being dismantled."<sup>23</sup> Kuznetsov replied that he had notified Soviet leadership of these concerns and "he had doubted that these [IL-28s] were properly classified as offensive weapons but this was only his opinion."<sup>24</sup> Kuznetsov also for the first time, provided the United States with details on the equipment and personnel placed in Cuba along with their current status. As of October 22<sup>nd</sup>, 24 missile sites were complete, with 16 still under construction and a total of 42 missiles present. By

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<sup>22</sup> Coleman, *The Presidential Recordings: Volume Four*, 273.

<sup>23</sup> "Telegram From the Mission to the United Nations to the Department of State, New York, November 4, 1962, 11:50 p.m.," *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1961-1963, Volume XI, Cuban Missile Crisis and Aftermath, eds. Edward C. Keefer, Charles S. Sampson, Louis J. Smith, and David S. Patterson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1996), Document 142.

<sup>24</sup> "Telegram From the Mission to the United Nations," *FRUS*, Volume XI, Document 142.

November 2<sup>nd</sup> each of these locations was inoperable and dismantled. Furthermore, Kuznetsov said they were willing to offer the United States photographs of the decommissioned sites and provide a detailed schedule of the transportation of equipment and missiles to the ports and a subsequent shipping schedule. Additionally, he welcomed the United States to “bring our own vessels along side the Soviet ships which were taking the missiles out in such a way as to enable us to see and count the missiles. They would also give us photographs of 42 missiles on the way out.”<sup>25</sup> This plan along with evidence from U-2 reconnaissance missions became the de facto verification of Soviet compliance for the United States.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, Kuznetsov previewed the information that would be contained in a forthcoming letter from Khrushchev to Kennedy. The Soviet leader objected to the inclusion of the IL-28s on the list of equipment to be removed from Cuba. In his letter to Kennedy, Khrushchev writes, “I have studied the list [of offensive weapons] and, I must confess, the approach of the American side to this matter has seriously worried me. In such a move, I will say frankly, I see a wish to complicate the situation, because it is impossible indeed to place into the category of ‘offensive’ weapons such types of weapons [the IL-28

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<sup>25</sup> “Telegram From the Mission to the United Nations,” *FRUS*, Volume XI, Document 142.

<sup>26</sup> Franqui, *Family Portrait with Fidel*, 200.

bombers].”<sup>27</sup> However, Khrushchev in his 27 October letter to Kennedy wrote, “We agree to remove from Cuba those means which you regard as offensive means.”<sup>28</sup> This statement implied that the agreement relied upon Kennedy’s definition of offensive weapons not Khrushchev’s.

Although the IL-28 issue had recently emerged as the hot-button item, it was unlikely President Kennedy would have sacrificed the resolution of the crisis over the bombers. As recently as October 28<sup>th</sup>, according to the summary record of the EXCOMM meeting, the President told those assembled that “we should not get ‘hung up’ on the IL-28 bombers, but we should seek to include them in the Soviet definition of ‘offensive weapons’ or ‘weapons we call offensive.’”<sup>29</sup> In fact, before the initial identification of the missile sites took place, on October 11<sup>th</sup>, Director McCone,

showed the President photographs of the crates which presumably would carry, or were carrying, IL 28s,

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<sup>27</sup> “Letter From Chairman Khrushchev to President Kennedy,” *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XI, Cuban Missile Crisis and Aftermath*, eds. Edward C. Keefer, Charles S. Sampson, Louis J. Smith, and David S. Patterson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1996), Document 145.

<sup>28</sup> Letter from Premier Khrushchev to President Kennedy, October 27, 1962. Papers of Robert F. Kennedy. Attorney General Papers. Series 09. Attorney General’s Confidential File, Box 217, Folder: “Kennedy-Khrushchev Letter, Etc.” John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

<sup>29</sup> “Summary Record of the Tenth Meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council, Washington, October 28, 1962, 11:10 a.m.,” *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XI, Cuban Missile Crisis and Aftermath*, eds. Edward C. Keefer, Charles S. Sampson, Louis J. Smith, and David S. Patterson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1996), Document 103.

Soviet medium bombers...The President requested that such information be withheld at least until after elections as if the information got into the press, a new and more violent Cuban issue would be injected into the campaign and this would seriously affect his independence of action.<sup>30</sup>

While the President viewed the outdated bombers as offensive weapons, and desired their removal, he was likely willing to take this argument only so far and never at the expense of achieving a peaceful resolution to the crisis.

### **The Crisis Ends**

On Robert Kennedy's 37<sup>th</sup> birthday he rightfully again played a central role in the finale of the crisis. The Attorney General had a scheduled meeting with Dobrynin at 11:00 A.M. on November 20<sup>th</sup> where the Kennedys hoped to receive an agreement from Khrushchev regarding the IL-28s. Upon arriving at the Attorney General's Justice Department office, Dobrynin smiled and said to Bobby, "I have a birthday present for you,"<sup>31</sup> as he handed him a letter. The letter, in Khrushchev's signature rambling and disorganized style, contained his concession to remove the IL-28s, and with them the final major obstacle to ending the crisis. Khrushchev wrote, "We took into consideration that you made certain statements and therefore the question of removal of IL-28 planes

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<sup>30</sup> "Memorandum on Donovan Project," *CIA Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962*, ed. Mary S. McAuliffe (Washington: History Staff, Central Intelligence Agency, 1992), Document 44.

<sup>31</sup> Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, 526-527.

assumed for you as President a certain significance and probably created certain difficulties. We grant it.”<sup>32</sup> Following the President's meeting with his Science Advisory Committee, his brother Bobby was waiting for him in order to personally deliver the good news.



Figure 4. President Kennedy speaks at a press conference on November 20<sup>th</sup>  
Source: Abbie Rowe. *White House Photographs. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston*

At 6:00 P.M. on November 20<sup>th</sup> the President of the United States addressed the nation for thirty minutes. Kennedy informed the world

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<sup>32</sup> “Message from Chairman Khrushchev to President Kennedy, Moscow, November 20, 1962,” *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XI, Cuban Missile Crisis and Aftermath*, eds. Edward C. Keefer, Charles S. Sampson, Louis J. Smith, and David S. Patterson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1996), Document 196.

that Khrushchev had agreed to remove the IL-28 bombers within 30 days and that “all known offensive missile sites in Cuba have been dismantled.” In return, upon verification, the United States agreed to remove the naval quarantine and provide assurances against an invasion of Cuba. In concluding his prepared remarks on Cuba, the President said:

In short, the record of recent weeks shows real progress and we are hopeful that further progress can be made. The completion of the commitment on both sides and the achievement of a peaceful solution to the Cuban crisis might well open the door to the solution of other outstanding problems.

May I add this final thought in this week of Thanksgiving: there is much for which we can be grateful as we look back to where we stood only four weeks ago—the unity of this hemisphere, the support of our allies, and the calm determination of the American people. These qualities may be tested many more times in this decade, but we have increased reason to be confident that those qualities will continue to serve the cause of freedom with distinction in the years to come.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Sound recording. Press Conference, 20 November 1962. White House Audio Collection, 1961-1963. Accession Number: JFKWHA-144. JFKL.



## Chapter 6

### Conclusion

*Looking back on it, the way that Bobby and his brother played this hand was absolutely masterly...What they did that week convinced me that they were both great men. And their death is a terrible loss to the world today.*

Harold Macmillan

Without Robert Kennedy's efforts, presence, and advice, the outcome of the Cuban Missile Crisis would have turned out differently. This crisis remains the closest the world has come to total nuclear conflict. The United States and the Soviet Union nearly allowed missiles in Cuba to ignite a rapidly escalating war between the two superpowers. President Kennedy faced one of the most difficult decisions that any president in history had to make. Without his brother playing such a valuable role during the crisis, the President would have likely followed his initial instinct for airstrikes, reinforced by the advice of many of his advisors pressing for military action against the missile sites. Describing Bobby's role, Arthur Schlesinger writes:

In all this, Robert Kennedy was the indispensable partner. Without him, John Kennedy would have found it far more difficult to overcome the demand for military action...It was Robert Kennedy who oversaw the Executive Committee, stopped the air-strike madness in its tracks, wrote the reply to the Khrushchev letter, [and] conducted the secret negotiations with Dobrynin.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, 531.



The decision-making process in October 1962 was obviously a team effort. President Kennedy could call on a large number of experienced and sage advisors, yet the Cuban Missile Crisis illustrates the importance and impact a single individual can have on such an important event. Had Bobby Kennedy decided to ultimately refuse the Attorney General position, or if the Bay of Pigs hadn't inspired the President to rely more heavily on his brother for working foreign policy issues, the outcome would have been quite possibly disastrous.

Many decades have passed since the last Soviet missile left Cuban soil, yet the impact of the crisis endures. The public expression of restraint regarding nuclear weapons set a precedent that continued throughout the Cold War and beyond. Afterward, both countries understood how close they truly were to nuclear war. As the crisis began to turn in their favor, President Kennedy remarked to his brother, in a reference to Abraham Lincoln, "This is the night I should go to the theater." To which Bobby responded, "If you go, I want to go with you."<sup>2</sup> Both brothers understood the importance of what they and the Soviets had accomplished. This was the defining moment of the Kennedy Presidency.

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<sup>2</sup> Robert F. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 84.

The Cuban Missile Crisis imparted an even more urgent desire on the part of the Kennedys to foster a better relationship with the Soviet Union to avoid revisiting the prospect of nuclear war. This aspiration was apparent in a speech by the President in June 1963 to the graduates of American University in Washington, D.C. Speaking in the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis on the peace he desired, the President said:

Not merely peace for Americans but peace for all men and women--not merely peace in our time but peace for all time. I speak of peace because of the new face of war. Total war makes no sense in an age when great powers can maintain large and relatively invulnerable nuclear forces and refuse to surrender without resort to those forces. It makes no sense in an age when a single nuclear weapon contains almost ten times the explosive force delivered by all the allied air forces in the Second World War. It makes no sense in an age when the deadly poisons produced by a nuclear exchange would be carried by wind and water and soil and seed to the far corners of the globe and to generations yet unborn.<sup>3</sup>

American diplomat W. Averell Harriman met with Khrushchev soon after the speech, and reported that the Soviet leader remarked that it was “the greatest speech by any American President since Roosevelt.”<sup>4</sup> Days later, the United States and the Soviet Union signed an agreement for establishing a direct hotline between the two countries to facilitate

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<sup>3</sup> Motion picture excerpt, President John F. Kennedy’s Commencement Address at American University, 10 June 1963, Accession Number: TNC:319. JFKL.

<sup>4</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), 904.

communications during any future crisis.<sup>5</sup> Khrushchev was so optimistic about his relationship with Kennedy that he felt they “had six more years (if the president was reelected) to build a real partnership.”<sup>6</sup> This feeling of peace and goodwill among the nations following the crisis culminated in an agreement in September 1963 between the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union on a Limited Test Ban Treaty.<sup>7</sup> The Cold War was evolving and shifting away from the specter of inevitable nuclear confrontations over Berlin or Cuba, and instead the focus shifted to confronting and containing the spread of the rival ideologies. This change did not result in peace, but it did significantly reduce the chance of thermonuclear Armageddon.

Whatever thaw had occurred in the Cold War due to the efforts of Kennedy and Khrushchev were brought to a halt when an assassin's bullet struck President Kennedy in Dallas, Texas on November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1963. According to Ambassador Dobrynin, if President Kennedy had lived, the relations between the two countries would have continued to improve.<sup>8</sup> The assassination came as a shock to Khrushchev and the next day he was reported to have been weeping over Kennedy's death. In

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<sup>5</sup> William Taubman, Khrushchev: *The Man and His Era* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003), 602.

<sup>6</sup> Taubman, *Khrushchev*, 604.

<sup>7</sup> John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, “Nuclear Test Ban Treaty,” <https://www.jfklibrary.org/JFK/JFK-in-History/Nuclear-Test-Ban-Treaty.aspx> (accessed 8 April 2017).

<sup>8</sup> Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence* (New York, NY: 1995), 106-107.

addition to an official letter of sympathy, he also added a personal letter expressing his sadness at the loss to the widowed Jacqueline Kennedy.<sup>9</sup>

Soon after Lyndon Johnson was sworn in as president, William Walton, a journalist and artist who was a close friend of President Kennedy, was sent to the Soviet Union by Robert Kennedy under the guise of visiting with Soviet artists for a future artistic community in the Soviet Union. Walton met with Georgi Bolshakov and passed on the Kennedys' opinion that the new President, Lyndon Johnson, would be "incapable of realizing Kennedy's unfinished plans."<sup>10</sup> Additionally, Walton gave Bolshakov an idea of Robert Kennedy's future political plans. According to Walton, Bobby intended to remain Attorney General until the end of 1964, run for governor of Massachusetts to build political capital, and finally to run for president. Robert Kennedy wanted Khrushchev to know that only he "could implement John Kennedy's vision and that the cooling that might occur in U.S.-Soviet relations because of Johnson would not last forever."<sup>11</sup> Walton felt that "If Robert differed from Jack, it was only in that he is a harder man; but as for his views, Robert agreed completely with his brother and, more important,

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<sup>9</sup> Taubman, *Khrushchev*, 604.

<sup>10</sup> Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro, & Kennedy 1958-1964* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 345.

<sup>11</sup> Fursenko and Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble*, 346.

actively sought to bring John F. Kennedy's ideas to fruition."<sup>12</sup> Walton's visit was the first of three by high-ranking Americans that caused Khrushchev to fear that Johnson would not continue the efforts of Kennedy towards détente.

About a week after Walton's visit, on December 18<sup>th</sup>, 1963, McGeorge Bundy, at the direction of President Johnson, met with Dobrynin over lunch to discuss the new administration. Dobrynin voiced concern over Robert Kennedy's place in the Johnson administration and as a consequence expressed doubts that the private communication channel the two men used so well during the Cuban Missile Crisis would continue to operate. Bundy responded that, "the Attorney General was a very important member of this Administration...and continued to have a deep interest in foreign affairs." But when pressed about who Dobrynin should communicate through in the future, Bundy "told him that I thought his best bet was Ambassador Thompson."<sup>13</sup> This new policy was just one of the many signs that the Johnson administration would be drastically different in its handling of the relationship with the Soviet Union.

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<sup>12</sup> Notes on a Visit to Moscow, December 1963. William Walton Private Papers. Series 2. Subject Files, Box 002, Folder "Art and Literature: Personal – Trip to Russia, 1963." JFKL.

<sup>13</sup> "Memorandum for the Record, Washington, December 18, 1963," *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume V, Soviet Union*, eds. Charles S. Sampson, John Michael Joyce, and David S. Patterson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1998), Document 388.

Late in 1964, the Politburo ousted Khrushchev from power. He became vulnerable following the Cuban crisis, seen by his rivals as an example of “harebrained scheming,”<sup>14</sup> and they began plotting his removal soon afterward. With Kennedy gone and a changing relationship with the United States, Khrushchev was easily removed from power and forced to retire far removed from the centers of power in Moscow.<sup>15</sup>



Figure 5. Robert Kennedy campaigning in New York  
*Burton Berinsky. Omni-Photo Communications, Inc., Universal Images Group*

The world was a different place after the two leaders who had worked so hard to bring their countries to a peaceful understanding were

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<sup>14</sup> Taubman, *Khrushchev*, 620.

<sup>15</sup> David G. Coleman, *The Fourteenth Day: JFK and the Aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012), 210.



gone. The conflict in Vietnam escalated, and tensions once again grew between the United States and the Soviet Union. Many believed the last hope for continuing the progress of the Kennedy administration lay with Robert Kennedy.

In 1968 with Vietnam spiraling out of control and an anti-Lyndon Johnson movement active inside the Democratic Party, Robert Kennedy, then a Senator from New York, decided to announce his candidacy for President on March 16<sup>th</sup>. After a decisive primary win in California on June 5, Bobby took the stage in front of supporters at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles. As he departed from his speech through the hotel kitchen, a man stepped out and fired multiple shots from a .22 caliber revolver. As he lay on the ground bleeding, his thoughts were not on his condition when he asked: "Is everybody okay?" The wounds were mortal and at 1:44 A.M., June 6<sup>th</sup>, 1968, Robert Kennedy was pronounced dead.<sup>16</sup>

Bobby devoted his personal life to his family and much of his professional life to supporting his brother, later attempting to see his brother's legacy fulfilled. How the world would look today if either or both brothers had survived is impossible to know. The idea that JFK, with RFK at his side, would have avoided the quagmire in Vietnam--however appealing--must remain speculative. However, we can safely

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<sup>16</sup> Larry Tye, *Bobby Kennedy: Making of a Liberal Icon* (New York, NY: Random House, 2016), 435-436.

conclude that the brothers' handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis probably saved the world from nuclear war. The fact that nuclear weapons have not been used since is a testament to the far-reaching impact of this accomplishment. The Cuban Missile Crisis teaches valuable lessons about the impact that individuals can have on the world. Without Robert Kennedy in EXCOMM and working a communication channel with Dobrynin, the outcome of the crisis would assuredly have been quite different.

*But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep.*

Robert Frost





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